

*Second Best
Fantasy*



Angela Kelly

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By Angela Kelly

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Author's Note: Although within these pages Janine Jordan is a fictional character, all song titles and lyrics are courtesy of the amazing Kayla Brown. To find out more about her and her music, visit myspace.com/kaylabrownmusic.

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Second Best Fantasy

By Angela Kelly

*For Cin, my fantasy woman incarnate.
And for Kayla, whose talent the world needs to know.*

Chapter 1

Joan Orlean.

I couldn't believe it. After two years of entering my name into dozens of email pools to attend record release parties for rock stars I either didn't care for or didn't know, I had missed my opportunity to catch a glimpse of someone I really admired.

Fuck.

I had missed work due to an overindulgence of Southern Comfort and less than satisfying sex the night before. Then, while still lying in bed unshowered, nauseous, and with a jackhammer deep in my cerebellum, the phone rang. Jan, a co-worker, had called to announce she had won the pool and would be trotting down to Avenue A Records the following Saturday to meet the one, the only, the every-lesbian-in-the-world-wanted-to-touch Joan Orlean.

It was out and out unfair; especially given the fact Jan wasn't even gay. The heinous wrong was equal to a straight guy winning first row tickets to a Melissa Etheridge concert. As I was ready to tell Jan to fuck off and never speak to me by the coffee maker again, she made me glad I hadn't said anything.

"I just wanted you to know that, although I would never surrender my invitation to anyone, even at gunpoint, I think there's a way I can get you in. I know you're a big fan," she said.

Swallowing bile, I managed to reply, "Any chance you can give me I'd pay money for."

"Well, that's exactly what you'll have to do. I have a bartender friend down at the Red Robin. He told me Jack Kasper is one of the owners of Hammerfield and Company. They are the caterers for the party. My friend claims Jack is a big time lush

and a regular at the Robin. If you feed him enough whiskey, he's been known to take bribes to sneak people in through the kitchen for other high profile events. I looked into this myself before I knew I'd won the pool."

Only in New York, I thought to myself.

"Thanks Jan, I'll give it a shot."

"How are you feeling, by the way?"

"I'll be in tomorrow."

Jan wasn't so bad. I hardly knew her except in an office environment kind of way, and I was touched she'd gone through the trouble of calling and advising me on how I could meet one of my few idols. The trick then became feeling well enough to venture out and smooth talk some catering drunk who was quite likely also an asshole.

* * * *

I guess you would say I was a high-society dyke, looking at my life from the outside in. My life at that time was the envy of a lot of friends, and with good reason. I drove a moderately priced car that I owned outright, I had a home in the east village, and I had a great job. However, I wasn't snobby or some rich kid, which redeemed me in the eyes of most people. I had worked hard for everything I had, and considered myself a genuinely good person. And, like many people that arouse jealousy in others, I was often lonely.

It was late summer in 1994 and life in New York then was any lesbian's dream. You could simply be out "among your own," take refuge as a stranger, go pick someone up or be picked up, or even seek out a friend instead of a lover, all dependent upon which bar, restaurant, or store you walked into.

I belonged in New York. Born and bred in New Jersey, educated in the Midwest, there was no place else on earth I would have ever wanted to call home.

I had moved to New York when I was thirty. After so many years of working hard and feeling like my wheels were spinning, perhaps turning thirty was all I ever needed to do. It was the

most fortunate year of my life.

I had returned to school when I was 24 and spent four years in the University of Illinois getting a Master's degree in English. I didn't want to teach so I found a great job in Illinois with a book compositor that didn't pay much but gave me priceless experience that allowed me to land my job in the big city and move back closer to my roots. Within a month of my big three zero, I had flown to New York for both a first and second interview at my job, packed up my apartment into a Ryder truck, untangled myself from yet another woman gone bad, and drove away, knowing I would never miss the cornfields of the Midwest.

The luckiest stroke was still to come. After commuting from a friends place in New Jersey for three long months, I met a real estate agent in a gay bar who wanted to fuck me so badly she offered me a deal on a sublet in the village for a price that was simply unheard of.

* * * *

My job was a dream job. I became an English major because I wanted to work in the publishing industry, so my education combined with my experience at the compositor allowed me the luxury of actually being in the profession I chose, something I know has only happened to one, maybe two people I'd ever met in my entire life.

I had acquired two solid years of production experience by the time I first flew to New York to meet the Human Resources director for Phantom Publishing, Inc. Phantom was indirectly affiliated with the music industry. Our clients were publishers that specialized in rock biographies, "scene" magazines, websites, and project management plans that were farmed out from record labels when they had more than they could handle.

Our responsibilities to the clients ranged from editing and proofreading to being customer service liaisons between them and the authors. If you owned any CD that was on the charts, chances are a colleague or I had scribbled corrections all over the inside cover jacket at one time. I was far removed from any

customer contact and that's exactly the way I liked it. I thanked the heavens each day as I rode the train to the shiny marble office building.

* * * *

I sat with my arms wrapped around my knees in the tub and let the shower wash away the debauchery of the night before. I'd made myself a breakfast of Bloody Marys and French toast at three o'clock in the afternoon after I'd gotten off the phone with Jan. I still felt woozy, but knew from experience a bottle of Pepto-Bismol and a half dozen Advil would have me on my feet and looking good enough to make the drunk caterer swoon.

A few hours later I dropped off my silk sheets at the dry cleaners and took a cab to the Red Robin. The bartender had been tipped off by Jan and pointed out Jack Kasper shooting pool with some other suits at the other end of the bar.

I wasn't sure how to approach him, so I had the bartender send him a drink on me. He looked over and raised his glass to me in a toast. I bided my time and waited for him to come to me. When it became obvious it wasn't going to happen, I took a chance and strode to the jukebox. Three dollars and an album side of Joan Orlean later, he came and perched on the barstool next to mine.

"So, I assume you're a dyke and my asking you to fuck me in exchange for getting you into Avenue A Records is out of the question."

I was right in my assumption he would be an asshole.

"Well, yes, that's true. But I do have \$250 in an envelope. Would that make up for the loss of a lay? I have to admit I'm still hung over and I wouldn't be very good even if I were straight."

He had a sense of humor because he snorted for a few minutes and then hacked that awful smoker's cough I was blessed enough to not be cursed with myself. He slid the envelope into his back pocket after removing a \$20 to wave in the bartender's face. "Bring my woman here a double of Jack straight up, and make it two for me."

To be honest, Jack was a good-looking guy that probably got laid a lot in spite of his atrocious demeanor. He promised to pull strings with the suits and get me on the guest list, so I wouldn't have to be smuggled in through the caterer's entrance in the alley. I thanked him with a hug and a brush of my lips against his. It was fucking Joan Orlean, after all. If I'd had enough to drink, I would've considered jerking him off if he had rejected my \$250 in the envelope.

* * * *

The next day arrived slow and languidly. I went to work to make up at least a few of my hours, feigning an illness so well I could've been nominated for an Oscar. I suspected at least a couple of my superiors were heavy drinkers and knew and understood the rare occasions I called out. I chose to play up to the innocent ones, because a drunk knows that you cannot trust another drunk.

After six hours I ran out of work and couldn't believe how caught up I was on my various projects. I was as guilty as any one for slacking off when I had the chance, but when I worked, I worked hard. We'd just come through an extremely busy period, and I'd been thinking of taking vacation leave. Not to go away or do anything special, just relax my mind and maybe take a trip over the bridge to visit my parents.

I mentioned this to Trish, one of my favorites, on my way out. She told me to let her know on Monday, they could afford to be without me for a few days, especially since I was one of their highest paid supervisors. As she walked away, I knew that she was mentally calculating how much money she could save in payroll. I knew this was why no one ever gave me a hard time when I put in a vacation request, the longer I was gone and not sucking up overtime, the better for the company.

I left and went home to get ready for Joan Orlean.

* * * *

I saw her the moment I stepped through the door. She was difficult to miss. She wasn't beautiful, yet she was striking. In a crowd of music industry suits and pantsuits, she stood out like blue suede in her seventies revival gear, reminiscent of a young Grace Slick.

During the controversial social climate of the nineties, there had been a resurgence of sixties and seventies memorabilia, clothes, attitudes, and TV shows. Although the marketing onslaught of all of this wound up somehow being marketed to teens, it reverberated throughout a generation old enough to remember those times. As a result, parents of the new fake hippie generation in their tie-dyes and ripped jeans were dusting off their turntables and pulling out their The Who, Doors, and Stones albums by the dozens.

The ever-evolving geniuses of the record industry didn't skip a beat and started signing bands like the Blue Is, fronted by the woman I was now staring at. I'd heard their one hit single, and at first, I couldn't even remember the singer's name. But then I remembered reading somewhere that she and Joan went way back and I had it: Janine Jordan.

I had no idea what the rest of Janine's album sounded like, but the one song was as good as, actually a little better than, anything else that was being granted precious air time on the radio. It had a Melissa Etheridge feel to it, with an old Heart type rocking backbeat added to enhance the vocals.

Unable to recall the name of the song, I asked a colleague I recognized from Rhino Records whom I spotted at the buffet table.

"Oh, yeah, 'Too Much Trouble,' I think. Yeah, that's her over there; she looks different than in the video."

Typical. Civilians assume if they ran into Cher in the grocery store she'd look and dress exactly the same as she had in those eighties Jack La Lane commercials.

I mingled, but kept my eye on Janine. I wasn't star struck; I didn't go in for all of that, if I had, I would've been all over Joan. Instead, I kept my cool. Eventually I'd make my way over to the crowd, flash Joan my pearly whites, and hope for the best.

And Janine, well, after all, I only knew the one song; she

could suck live for all I knew, anybody could sound great on a studio cut. She just had a presence that took over the room. Little ringlets of long, ashy brown hair danced around her face when she spoke. She had eyes the color of granite, and they were extremely expressive, even from a distance.

I'd been watching her over someone's shoulder, so even though I couldn't always see her entire face I could tell when she was laughing, listening, or bored. She caught my gaze a few times, but didn't give any recognition. This irritated me since most women couldn't help at least flashing me a smile. Maybe she was what some lesbians call "terminally straight" and simply couldn't be bothered with even a touch of politeness. Hurdling my fascination, I wrote her off as a snob, walked to the bar, and started to plan something witty to say to Joan that would set me aside from all others.

While sipping a double gin and tonic I socialized with people involved with the record labels and music publications. They were giving me sideways glances, surely wondering how not one but two Phantom employees got into this gig. I talked with in-house artists, ghostwriters, customer service reps. They thought of my company the way I did: a fall back for them when the going got tough or the workload too enormous or on too tight a schedule.

That also meant they considered me an outsider. It was like when you went to a community college and hung out with university types. They thought they were somehow more real and you were just not good enough. I didn't care too much for any of them and I loved my job. It was frustrating.

Despairing, I ordered another drink and made my way over to the crowd around Joan, the reason I'd come in the first place.

Standing around waiting my turn I pretended to read the track names on the back of the CD as if I didn't own it and knew every lyric by heart. I would've cleaned up in a Rock and Roll Jeopardy round if Joan Orlean were the category.

Just as I was edging closer to Joan herself, ready to spout something poetic that didn't resemble a dyke pick-up line at all, I felt a soft hand clasp mine and pull me out of the crowd. I looked up to

see who was attached to the mysterious hand, and saw Janine.

“What are you reading?”

Dumbly, I checked my hands for a book and found none.

“Excuse me?”

She repeated, “What are you reading right now? I mean, at home, what’s on your night stand with a bookmark sticking out of it?”

I decided to play along. Perhaps she wasn’t so much of a snob, or even straight for that matter.

“Gravity’s Rainbow,” I lied. Well written or not, I wasn’t about to admit to “White Oleander” when it had the birthmark of Oprah’s Book Club seared into its cover.

“Ah, a real masochist. I knew you were my kind of woman.”

Her unusual way to begin a conversation made me laugh.

She went on, “I saw you eying me. I was wrapped up in business talk and I have to convince my managers I’m hanging on their every syllable.”

“Sounds like hard work.” I found myself unable to talk to her and glance around the room at the same time. Her eyes had tiny yellow pinpricks of fire at the center of the pupils. Intensity gleamed from them, or maybe from her body, or maybe from her aura, I couldn’t decide which.

“I suppose you don’t have to do that at your job?” she joked.

“I try and avoid management whenever possible. Wouldn’t want them to see the real me, I might get fired as a result.”

“Why don’t you buy me a drink and let me try to uncover the real you for a while? I’m an excellent conversationalist.”

She slid an arm around my elbow and strolled as if we were in a park or on a deserted, dusky beach. We got to the bar and she ordered Dewar’s on the rocks; I should have guessed. I wished we were at a real bar instead of a catered, invitation-only party at a record store downtown. If this were an intervention from the Fates, they could have chosen a more comfortable atmosphere. Being single was rough at times, but when certain circumstances arose, I could count on my instincts if I was on my own turf.

We found a table away from the main area. We chatted

about Phantom Publishing and how I came to be in New York. I had told the story to so many nameless, faceless women, it was like a screenplay, well rehearsed. Yet something in her questioning persuaded me to be more open than I usually was with strangers. I told her about my writing and tiny publications here and there, surprised at my own candor. A writer is always willing to chew off an eager ear. Still, a certain reserve veiled the truth behind layers of mind only a few have managed to peel away.

I'd met maybe three true peelers in my life, and they were all refuse on the side of the long road of broken love my life had been for many years. Several more years convinced me that, potential or not, no woman would ever be worth baring my soul to. True love was too painful, I had learned that much. Yet, every time Janine touched my hand casually from across the table, another door flew open, and I wanted to tell her more.

"I have a few commitments here and need to hang around a while. Plus, I want to catch up with Joan, there's been too much clamoring for us to talk much. What about you? I understand if you need to get out of here."

"Are you trying to get me to leave? Concerned I'll be 'Too Much Trouble'?"

She blushed and looked shyly down at the table. "I didn't think you knew who I was."

"I don't," I said. "But I'm not opposed to trying to find out."

Janine was from Long Island, but had recently acquired a place up in Brooklyn Heights. Apparently, the record label didn't think that Janine Jordan and the Blue Is were a one hit wonder. I could work until I was seventy and never afford to even retire there in a one room rented condo, let alone own property. I was already living beyond my means in the village.

She said, "I love my new home, but never get to spend much time there. When I come to the city I live in hotels."

I thought that may have been an invitation, but I couldn't be sure. Even if it was, I wasn't sure if I wanted to accept. It had been some time since I had met a woman that appealed to me both physically and intellectually. As much as I loved New York,

city women were one big breed and predominantly untrue.

There was something about Janine that was honest, and something else just a little bit sad. She intrigued me, and I couldn't escape the novelty of being picked up by being asked about my tastes in literature. I was a little frightened of her. She was the sort of woman I would fall for if I allowed myself to.

But I wasn't about to. I pegged her as probably bi, which I usually avoided. Not that I'd never overlooked it before, but it was usually in lieu of one-nighters. It dawned on me that I was afraid because I wasn't viewing her as a one-nighter. I was watching her and thinking what it would be like to date her. That was a bad sign for me, my history was proof that relationships were largely not in my cards of fortune, despite love or even commitment. I'd tried both, and more than once.

So, as I listened to her speak I mentally switched gears to the low-down and dirty womanizer part of me, who thought it would be fun to fuck a singer. I was safer that way.

Later on, she introduced me to Joan Orlean. She was as mesmerizing in person as she was through my sub-woofer speakers. She looked tired, and said she was looking forward to the end of the tour, but that was eight months away. The three of us small-talked for a while, and, I have to admit, being close to the two of them and sensing that there had been at least one sexual encounter between them really turned me on. I thought I was blushing, so I excused myself and retreated to the bar, where I ran into Jan, who until that moment I had forgotten all about.

"Hey there, Maggie!"

"Hey Jan, let me buy you a drink?"

"Sure. I'm so glad you got in."

We talked about Joan and the greatness of such a versatile singer. I talked to Jan for over an hour, but I wasn't really listening. I hung out, pretending to stay because of Jan, but it started getting late, and I wondered if I shouldn't just give Janine a polite handshake and go home. Another hour whooshed by, Jan went home to her husband and kids, and I still stayed. A combination of wanting to be in the same room with Janine and Joan and my alcoholic demon tugging at my sleeve

kept me chained to Avenue A Records. The drinks were getting to me, but hell, it was Saturday evening after all.

I thought I would move on after saying goodbye and go pick up someone I had no interest in at all, but that was just an attempt to fool myself. I had a feeling of impending doom; I knew I would run into the flames whole-heartedly and without care.

I felt as if I had been in that room sitting at the bar for days. I was spinning. I hated myself for having a heart that actually still functioned after so many years of broken glass in the roadway of my ill-fated love life. As always when I'd had enough to drink and on the verge of being honestly interested in someone, every ex I've had since I was fifteen came screaming into memory without remorse. One by one their faces rose up out of the dust in my mind like ancient phoenixes to remind me that, in the infamous wisdom of Led Zeppelin, "the soul of a woman was created below." I was most certainly drunk and doomed, a disastrous combination.

While I was nursing another gin and tonic (I'd lost count ages ago) Janine came to retrieve me from the bar.

"Hey stranger, why so glum?"

She was still filled with energy, not enough time to travel back and forth to the well as I had, allowing me to sink within myself and brood.

"Life is a double edged sword, one of laughter one of pain..."

"Forever cutting the heart asunder."

She finished my Dickinson quote without even so much as a flutter of eyelids.

Amazing.

"Well, truth is beauty..."

"Beauty truth."

My turn. I couldn't remember anyone ever being able to play this game so well since my ex-fiancé. That hurt, but was inspiring, nonetheless.

"Joan wants to go grab something to eat. Are you interested?"

Was I interested? Not in dining, that was for sure. I was

hungry, but the hunger in my loins was much more predominant. I remained silent, assuming it would be taken for a disgruntled 'no'.

"I think I know what you need. Don't let it worry you, Joan and I have been blowing each other off since we were little kids."

She trotted away, exchanged a few polite words with Joan, and then went to a young guy in jeans and a T-shirt. They disappeared behind a row of CDs. Instinct told me she was making a "business transaction." When she returned to me, I noticed for the first time her patchouli scent. I could drown in that smell. She took my hand and inserted a perfectly packaged eight ball of coke. She did indeed know what I needed. I was a drunk by trade, with marijuana as a comforting friend, but occasional recreational rich-kid drugs were a nice alternative.

"Well, well," I said. "How do you know I'm not a cop disguised as a square with a straight job in publishing?"

"Because if you were, you wouldn't have had to bribe Jack Kasper to get you in here tonight." So she'd asked around. I was flattered but a little embarrassed.

"I think Joan would go home with you. Want to change up your date for the evening? I wouldn't hold it against you."

"Yes, but does Joan know Dickinson? Somehow I doubt it."

"How do you feel about silent films? 'Nosferatu' is at the art theater down the street. Plays all night."

She brushed a hand against my cheek and kissed me. I felt as if it lasted for eternity, and had that sensation of falling I knew all too well. I was about to complicate everything I had taken years and years to get under control. If thirty had been the luckiest year of my life, thirty-two was about to be my descent into the maelstrom.

* * * *

After the movie, we strolled around Tompkins Square Park and talked about the lack of biographical information available on Murnau. We hadn't touched the coke and I switched to soda the moment we left Avenue A. I wanted to remember everything.

Sitting on a park bench, Janine told me about how she had come to be the front woman for the Blue Is, who had already been an established rock blues band on the local tri-state area circuit. They weren't getting radio play at all, and their manager had thrust Janine upon them in spite of their disdain. Much animosity ensued, but after their first live performance of "Too Much Trouble," which was an original Janine piece, everything changed to a fairytale. The boys in the band couldn't deny Janine's seduction of the audience, and the audience was how records were sold. However, much like The Doors of long ago, they were having difficulty capturing their live presence in a studio.

I listened to her and mentally memorized every aspect of her physicality. Within hours, she became more and more beautiful to me and it scared the hell out of me. We got up to walk again, and came upon several musicians strumming their way through one whole half of the Beatles' White album. Janine kept her hold on my arm and brought me down to the ground to sit with them in a semi-circle. A joint and a carafe of cheap sangria were making their way around and we each had a hit from both bottle and smoke. It was good quality weed for a bunch of struggling artists, they must have had a "regular at the park" discount.

When the group reached "Blackbird" Janine launched into song with a voice as sweet as a morning dove. I fought back the screaming phoenixes and decided I would allow myself to fall after all. She was much too sweet to be another devil in my long list of devils wearing blue dresses. I eased into the twilight of the early hours, and reminded myself what a terrific enigma the city was, and I looked forward to peeling the layers away with Janine as I lost myself in that magical voice. I allowed myself to imagine a near future, complete with moonlight and dinners and long summer nights, my romantic soul ignited with possibility.

More sangria went around. Janine lay cradled in my arms, singing along softly to a variety of seventies tunes, and occasionally craning upwards for those tender little kisses so typical of a new attraction to an unknown soul. I didn't want the night to end, and tried to ignore the rising sun in hopes that I had some magical

powers to conjure its delay. Sundays broke much too early. The minstrels dispersed one by one, leaving us to the deafening roar of morning church, synagogue, and grocery store traffic.

“Take me to your castle, my sweet prince,” Janine purred.

Glad to be home, I offered tea a-la Maggie; a combination of Japanese imported green tea laced with Crown Royal. Janine accepted, and went to examine my CD collection, which was the envy of all who knew me well enough to be invited to my apartment.

She made some selections and loaded Aretha, Janis, and, of all things, Helen Reddy into my five-chamber spinner. I watched her longingly from the threshold between my kitchen and living room. She proceeded to my bookshelves, thumbed through a copy of Blake’s “Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience” and then plopped down on my well-worn life-sucker of a couch with Joan Nestle’s “A Restricted Country.”

I retreated to my bedroom to change; I’d been wearing the same clothes for way too many hours. I did my wardrobe switch, dabbed on some cologne, and returned to the living room with a Courtney Love T-shirt and plaid lounge pants in my arms as a humble offering to Janine.

“I have to go to Los Angeles on Wednesday,” she said matter-of-factly.

Okay. That left me at least two whole days with her, barring any prior commitments. I’d decided hours ago to take Trish up on her offer and secure a few days off. Synchronicity has always had a way of creeping into my life on a regular basis.

“Feel like being caretaker for a while?” she said with upraised arms.

I carefully undressed her, exploring her body as I went in time to Aretha crooning “The House that Jack Built.” She was nearly perfect for her height, more than I could claim about my own body. I noticed several interesting birthmarks on her midriff.

“The belt of Orion,” she sighed, “Makes me feel cosmically connected from time to time.”

I didn’t want to rush into sex, since I sensed this was not the last I would see of Janine Jordan. I dressed her in Courtney

and pants with the same care as I had undressed her. Every kiss along the way was different, in that searching, boundary-testing sort of way.

We didn't exchange words for a long time. She lay between my thighs and I caressed her shoulders under the T-shirt as she read every passage I had highlighted in the book. Occasionally she would read something twice, and then look up at me and gaze into my eyes without clarity, only trying to guess why particular words carried so much meaning for me. Had she asked, I would've confessed to nearly anything, but I suspected she enjoyed trying to figure me out without guidance.

When she'd read all of my favorite passages from cover to cover, she laid the book on my coffee table and pushed up my shirt to expose my double Ds. She encircled each nipple with nibbles and licks, pushing against my inner thighs with her weight. I was dreadfully tired and still afraid of my overwhelming emotions. But sometimes, actually often, body overrides mind, and I responded to her touch by slipping the lounge pants down over her ass. I felt the creaminess of her and wanted to melt into her arms without retreat. She remained on top, sucking on my neck and moving in rhythm against my open palm. Within minutes, she came, an automatic lifting to my ego of sexual expertise.

"I told you that you seemed like my kind of woman."

She smiled up at me and let her hands trail over my sweatpants and the throbbing clit beneath them. I wanted her to fuck me, but knew it was inappropriate, given my state of mind. I was ruminating on a past not often dwelt upon; I couldn't focus and be in the moment with her, so the moment would have to wait.

It didn't help matters that Helen was belting out "Angie Baby" and all I could think of was a short story based on the song I'd written when I was nineteen in my first creative writing class.

Her touch felt so good, I had an idiotic voice in my head that wanted to say "I love you" to a woman I didn't know, a voice that crops up at the most inopportune moments because the brain so often confuses lust for undying love. Thank God I never listened to it.

"In time," I said, and was abashed at sounding so sure of myself. "I mean, surely this isn't the last time I'll have this moment? If it is, by all means proceed."

"If you'll allow me the pleasure, I would like nothing more than to spend more time with you. I've been looking for a muse, you know," Janine said.

"Well, I'm not sure I can live up to muse status. I have a hard time inspiring even myself, let alone someone else. But I'm a willing servant, I'll do my best."

I was grinning from ear to ear.

She said, "Maybe the roles will reverse. I saw a lot of empty notebooks over on your shelf."

Maybe. I could've written at least twenty pages that night alone.

Typically, on a day I would wish for endless rain and thunderstorms, the sun pushed aside my bay window curtains and streamed in with harsh resonance. Despite the elements, I fell into a deep sleep with my arms around a woman I would soon discover would be the root of both my blackest and most brilliant inspirations.

Chapter 2

I've always had a philosophy that you can gauge how interested you are in someone by what you wake up and think about the next morning.

Sometimes, you wake up groggy and can only think about your immediate responsibilities for the day, or wonder if your mom calls will she sense you're with someone, or just plain wishing that whoever is lying next to you would wake up and get the hell out.

When I woke up the next morning on the couch with Janine, I smiled. My auto re-play had gone on all night long, and I couldn't help internally singing "There's a rose in Brooklyn Heights" along with Aretha's rendition of "Spanish Harlem." That was followed by a strong desire to cook her an extravagant breakfast, and I took a mental inventory of what was available in my fridge. Despite my nightlife, I was home often and well stocked. I went out to drink; my eating was a private matter.

You can also measure the other party's interest in you by their "Wow, so you're whom I had sex with last night" behavior. Janine slept for another hour and a half after I maneuvered my way out from underneath her. That meant she was comfortable and in no hurry to get back to her responsibilities either. Not everybody likes food the moment they arise, so I made coffee and sat in my favorite leather chair and watched her sleep for a long time. For lack of a better cliché, she looked so innocent asleep. I gathered it had probably been a while since her last restful slumber. She probably dreamed about billboard charts and audience members in the first five rows.

I vaguely remembered her mentioning LA on Wednesday, but chose not to think about it. Maybe after Tuesday I would never see her again; maybe after this morning. Perhaps she would wake up, change into her clothes from the night before, and say, "Hey thanks, I had a great time. I'll call you when I'm in town." I hoped that wouldn't be true, but I didn't like to set myself up for disappointment. I prepared for the worst and started re-reading *I Was Amelia Earhart*.

Janine woke to the sound of my phone ringing. I thought about letting the machine get it, but decided it might be, oh, I don't know, Ed McMahon telling me I'd won a million dollars.

It was my mother. She just called to say "hi" and remind me my niece's birthday was next week and had I bought a card yet, she wanted some new Winnie the Pooh game thing if I had the time to shop, blah, blah, blah. I loved my mother but she sure had lousy timing. I talked to her while roaming around with the cordless, a little embarrassed. My mom brought me up to date on a variety of family matters and gossip, while I watched Janine choose a coffee mug from my rack. I was tickled when she chose the dolphin one with the tail for its handle.

I chatted for a while with Mom while Janine went back to the couch with her black coffee, stopping on her way at the bookshelf again, this time snatching *The Complete Poems of e.e. cummings*.

I swear my heart skipped a beat as I silently recited, "Your slightest look easily will unclothe me..." I wanted suddenly and violently to make love to her until she came to those words inside my head. Then I realized I had actually thought and formed the words "make love to" instead of "fuck" or "bang" or even "have sex with," something I rarely conceptualized.

"Okay, Mom, yes, I love you too. Goodbye."

She didn't look up or tease me, and I was grateful for that. I was glad and proud to have two parents still married to each other for nearly 45 years. I put the phone back in its cradle and went to unload the three CDs that had been played to death since the night before.

"I don't mind, you know. Those are three kick-ass women you've got there. But I know you were awake longer than me, and too many repeats of "You and Me Against the World" is probably equal to Chinese water torture."

I chose a different Janis Joplin, an old Marianne Faithfull, and, against my better judgment, for fear of Janine seeing right through me, Joan Armatrading. I played Joan first, equally hoping Janine both would and wouldn't see the transparency of playing "Whatever's For Us, For Us."

To my surprise and delight, she arose and slow-danced with me in my living room and sang along effortlessly. My overwhelming feelings nearly brought tears to my eyes, and before the song was over, I released myself from her, feigning a need to urinate. Behind the closed door of my bathroom, I gathered my bearings and talked to myself in the mirror. I offered too much of a glimpse into the personal, private side of me, and chastised myself for not being smarter and stronger this late in life.

Composed, I returned to Janine, who was (again to my heart's joy) sitting on the floor stroking Sebastian, my cat and the only man in my life besides relatives or co-workers. Sebastian didn't often embrace strangers, and I found it an undeniable sign that he had buddied up so quickly. I put my terror away and sat down beside them.

"So, are you a Slimfast and yogurt woman or an eggs, toast, and sausage woman?"

"What do you think?"

"I'd put my money on the cholesterol of champions."

"Well, you'd be right. How did you sleep? I know it's not always easy being the pillow."

"With these cows?" I said, cupping my breasts. "I slept better than I probably have in months."

"I know what you mean," she said. A look of intense thoughtfulness crept across her face. Unlike me, she was the kind of woman to choose her words carefully before she spoke.

"I think somehow that I know you, or, at least, how you are and how you might be feeling. I hope you don't think I'm crazy for saying that. But, well, I'm not really sure what it is I want to say. I feel you may already have feelings for me, and I don't think that's weird or anything, because, well..." she trailed off.

I panicked. Thirty-two and still wearing my heart on my sleeve. I guessed some people really never learn. I was afraid she would disappear, and I didn't know which was worse: to be falling so quickly for someone I hardly knew or realizing that I thought that part of me was dead when it was obviously still very much alive. It had been so long since I had made this mistake.

I hadn't thought about a woman in terms of how she might

fit into the rest of my life since I was in my early twenties. And now, without warning, I was in community college in New Jersey all over again. I swore after that particularly beautiful and enamoring devil that I was destined and determined to be alone.

While I was berating myself and planning the next bottle of Scotch for later that afternoon, Janine surprised me in a way I had not been since my best friend took me to a strip club for my 25th birthday.

“Did you ever read Helen Keller?”

I retraced eons of honors English and literature classes. I had it, and tried desperately not to screw it up, “*Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.*” I couldn’t remember the rest.

“*The fearful are caught as often as the bold.*” She knew the quote as if it were her phone number.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is, something about last night was reminiscent of more innocent times for me too. I haven’t felt this way for a long time. I don’t know which one of us is the bold or the fearful. Maybe each of us is a little bit of both. Being involved with me isn’t easy.”

She hesitated for a moment and added, “I have references.” She smiled and it lit up my whole apartment. For the first time in a very long while, I was speechless.

There was so much I wanted to say and to ask, but I couldn’t bring myself to ruin a perfect moment with my morose outlook. Always a big believer in “things that seem too good to be true usually are,” I put my reservations on the shelf, at least temporarily.

She’d just given me an opportunity to pull full steam ahead, and I planned to embrace it, for however long this fantasy would last. I refrained from telling her being involved with me wasn’t easy either. I had a handful of witnesses that would gladly testify to that.

* * * *

We orchestrated breakfast together as if we were an old

married couple. I couldn't remember the last time I had shared a meal with a woman besides drunken diner escapades during the interval between heavy drinking and the promise of sex. She knew her way around a kitchen, which somewhat surprised me. I took her for a fast food junkie, and I was impressed when she chose to add fresh cilantro to our omelets. I was glad she was a coffee drinker, I honestly believe there is something mentally unbalanced in people who don't require caffeine to kick start their day.

Cooking is a long time passion of mine, and it was nice to share breakfast with someone who didn't drown her eggs in ketchup or pour a ton of salt on everything. We ate mostly in silence, but the list of questions I wanted to ask was growing.

"Are you bi, Janine?" Perhaps not the best choice for question number one, but it was nagging at me.

"Well, I guess you would say that. I've only had sexual encounters with women; my relationships have all been with men. I'm one of those 'refuse to define myself by society's standards' kinds of people. Although, I believe I've only had sex with women and not relationships simply because I haven't found the right woman. Maybe you're the right woman."

She said this so casually I couldn't decide if I was irritated or thrilled. I'd been a biology experiment before, and hated it. I decided she was just being honest. We'd spent one night together. How could I expect her to see me as anything other than an opportunity, a chance at fleeting happiness?

"I won't ask you the same question," she said. "I can tell the difference between a real lesbian and all of the rest."

I could tell the shields had been raised back up on both sides. Breakfast over; the day half gone, neither one of us was about to bring up the topic of only an hour ago that was already a distant memory. I would remember what she had said about us for years to come, and about my own reminiscent feeling the night before and the simple pleasure of being alone with a woman who said "fuck" a dozen times during a concert yet quoted Helen Keller in private company.

In time, I would feel as if the words she had said to me

earlier that day were the only truly honest words she'd ever spoken to me.

* * * *

Embarking on a relationship with any artist, regardless of the trade, is shaky ground at best. Should I have declared, "Well, if you're fucking guys, I really don't think this is going to work out?" I wouldn't have said that because it wasn't true. We certainly couldn't be considered "serious" after one night, but I did want to be with her. If she had told me that not only did she do men, she strictly did men with three heads, I still would have welcomed her into my bed.

New territory carries with it an air of recklessness. If I were going to pursue this, I would have to do it based on instinct. Instinct told me that, in time, other sexual relationships would dissolve, for both of us. If they didn't, well, I figured I'd cross that bridge when I got there. I'd had my share over the years. I enjoyed last night's romp, but didn't consider it sex, more like aided masturbation. And, although I already felt a sexual intimacy with Janine, my priorities were elsewhere. Nestling on the couch with her, touching her and reading over her shoulder, these were the things I wanted to recapture first and foremost. As the great Jim Morrison once said, "I have plenty of people to fuck but no one to talk to."

"So, what do you think you might want to do today, my sweet?" She asked like an eighteenth century maiden. As she did, I noticed her eyes darted to the living room in the general area where the eight ball remained untouched.

"Well, I suppose we could let it snow and go out to explore the world."

Why not? I gathered we'd do some bar hopping and cruise the parks, like any other coked up New York couple on a Sunday afternoon.

To my surprise, she said, "Do you fish?"

Did I fish? I had a wealth of B.A.S.S. (Bass Angler's Sportsman's Society) T-shirts I hadn't had an occasion to wear

for at least a couple of years.

“But it’s two o’clock in the afternoon. Any fisherman with half a brain will tell you there is no such thing as fishing except very early in the morning or after the sun goes down.”

She looked surprised at my seriousness.

“Just a thought, I didn’t know you were some die-hard fisherman. I just thought it might be, you know, fun. I haven’t been fishing since I was a kid.”

I tried to imagine her as a kid and thought how adorable and dangerous she must have been. I thought maybe I had hurt her feelings, so I said, “It would be fun. I was just stating one of my many die-hard serious fisherman facts. I know... many.”

She smiled. What I was really thinking is that no matter what she had suggested for the remains of the day I would have followed her anywhere just then.

“What would you like to do? You are the host, after all. Fishing was just the first thing that popped into my head. I think I have a craving for seafood.”

The perfect date popped into my head.

“Feel like taking a drive?” I asked.

“Where to?”

I wanted to share more with her. She had already glimpsed my soul less than twenty-four hours ago simply by reading a book I owned and choosing CDs from the wall as if she’d known me for an eternity. I wanted to do something that would at least leave a lasting impression, and perhaps instill within her a desire to see me again when she returned from LA.

“I am a New Yorker by trade, but I will always be a Jersey girl at heart.”

She started to sing the Tom Waits song Springsteen had made famous, but I stopped her mid note with a kiss so filled with feeling it had no business being on the lips of a woman I had just met. Throwing caution to the wind always had been a recurring understatement throughout my life.

“There’s just one thing,” she said. “What should I wear?”

Sleeping attire was one matter, easily resolved, but Janine and I were by no means the same height or build.

“Can’t we just stop by your place? I can navigate my way into my old stomping grounds from any of the bridges.”

She hesitated. Oh, Christ, I thought. She thinks I’ll stalk her. She doesn’t want me to know where she lives!

“It’s just that a lot of the time on the weekends there’s so much traffic, I don’t live far from the Promenade, romanticists everywhere on a Sunday afternoon.”

You’re looking at one, I thought to myself. I’d had many strolls along the streets of the Heights with fantasies of everlasting love in my younger days. It was also an old favorite haunt to write, to be inspired. But, the traffic was a bitch. I hoped her reason was true, and she wasn’t just covering up what I feared.

Reading my mind, she said, “We can play ‘your place or mine’ when I get back from LA.”

The words hit me like a slap on the face. I didn’t want to think about her leaving, and didn’t care to ask how long she would be gone. I was sure it would be weeks, if not months.

I fought off the cracking in my voice and said, “Well, I guess we’ll be going shopping first, before I make an attempt at showing you how much like those damn romantics I can be.”

We showered separately and dressed quickly, I guiltily in clean clothes, her in her garb from the night before. We did a few lines and took the rest with us. It was good; she must have dealt with the kid in the record store before. Or maybe she just had a lucky score. Or maybe I didn’t partake often enough to know what qualified as “good.”

Apparently, she did, because as I doubted my own faith in my ability to drive anytime soon, she said, “This is pretty low grade stuff, but I like it. Doesn’t get you all strung out, keeps you nice and mellow.” She giggled a little on the word ‘mellow’. At least I knew she was high and we were on the same ride.

We floated around the village until we wound up in a retro thrift shop, as if built there that very morning for her shopping needs. To my surprise, she picked out a few very non-outrageous pairs of jeans and a couple of tie-dyes. We were in and out with her in clean digs within minutes.

Just as well, I wanted to be underway before the New

Jersey residents returning from their weekend summer escapades in the Big Apple choked the New Jersey turnpike like a helpless animal until it barely breathed. For a minute, I lost my sense of direction, and couldn't figure out where my parking garage was. Of course, given my state of mind, this struck me as hilarious and it was all I could do to refrain from doubling over in hysterics. Janine laughed along with me without knowing why, and then told me a story about the first time she'd ever dropped acid and actually boarded the wrong plane in an airport.

She'd been late to arrive at the gate and the door to the tunnel was already locked. She frantically flagged down an airline person, who unlocked the door and ushered her inside without ever checking her boarding pass. It wasn't a full flight, so she just took the first seat she found that wasn't too near anyone else. The whole flight she was mesmerized by the cover of a book another passenger was reading. The plane ride seemed shorter than she had expected but she had no real concept of time. She was in Phoenix, Arizona for nearly three hours before she realized it wasn't her travel destination. She had a good laugh, checked into a hotel room, ordered a bottle of champagne from room service, drew a bath, and waited to come down. "That was probably the best time I've ever had with myself!"

We laughed like stupid stoned people do, and after a while she added, "I don't often like to be alone."

She turned to me then and kissed me in the middle of the street. "So, are you taking me somewhere you take all your girlfriends?"

I'd taken a few women where we were going, but none that counted.

"Hey, look! This is my garage. I guess they didn't really move it in the middle of the night after all."

We giggled all the way to my car. Once inside my Toyota, we sat with the engine running and the radio on and made out for a while. I felt a bliss I thought I vaguely recognized from high school. As I drove through the tunnel, she had one hand on my knee and sang along to Rod Stewart singing, "Tonight's the Night" on a classic rock station. There was that irony creeping in again.

* * * *

I showed off a little on the turnpike, weaving needlessly in and out of traffic. I felt normal, but knew better, so decided to do the speed limit and try not to draw attention to myself.

“Good idea,” said Janine. I couldn’t fathom how it was possible for a woman I’d just met to read my mind like that. I actually started to think about what I was *going to* think about, so that nothing incriminating slipped in. I wished desperately I had the same ability. I would have paid dearly to know what she was thinking as I exited the Garden State Parkway at Keyport. For all I knew Janine might have known Jersey like the back of her hand, she could’ve had some guido boyfriend with an IROC-Z down in Asbury Park when she was younger. I hoped it wasn’t true, that she had never strolled the boardwalk at Seaside Heights holding hands, or stood by shyly as a lover won huge teddy bears for her. I wanted to be the one with whom she did things for the first time. There’s nothing more thrilling in a relationship than being a “first.” It reminds us how much of ourselves we are willing to give, long after we’ve decided there isn’t anyone worth giving to.

I navigated southern Jersey easily; I’d been doing it all my life. When you’re from there, you’re entire youth and much of your teen years are absorbed by the draw of the Atlantic Ocean. Families take week long trips down the shore when you’re little, and when you get older you go to the same place to smoke pot with your friends. When you’re small, you go on all the rides, later you spend money by the hundreds trying to win a “free” TV, or a Judas Priest mirror, or a carton of cigarettes. The boardwalks of the Jersey shoreline echo with a bygone time that will never die as long as people live there. The shaping of many a teenager’s life has taken place contemplating sex, drugs, cars, ambition, girlfriends, boyfriends, nearly anything, over a soda and a tray of clams on the half-shell. This magnificent country of ours should have more Jersey shores.

* * * *

I pulled along the side of the road past the restaurant, they didn't really have a parking lot. I glanced over at Janine, who was happily looking around like a puppy seeing new and interesting scenery.

"You said you had a craving for seafood. I've brought you to some of the best seafood you can get on the East coast. I would have brought it to you, but that would have entailed leaving you."

She smiled and said, "Should we indulge before dinner?" She patted her jean pocket where the remainder of the coke was stashed.

"Why not?" I replied.

In truth it didn't matter to me. I enjoyed my high and didn't mind another. This is both the beauty and ugliness of cocaine. It's a short high, so you come down cool instead of crashing. Yet, because it's so short, you get a short high again and again until suddenly there isn't any more, and then all you want is to go out and score more. Not a financially sound drug of choice if you asked me. But this coke was free, for me anyway, and, I felt that Janine could afford it otherwise she wouldn't have it. When it was gone it was gone, I had hours planned that would long outlive the depletion of the amphetamine supply. I preferred it that way. Although I wanted Janine, whether she was clean and sober or falling down wasted, her reactions to me could only be validated if she were on the straight and narrow. If every woman that loved me when they were on something suddenly decided to drop by and see me on the same day, I'd have to get a bigger apartment to accommodate them all.

We walked into the Sandbar and I let Janine look around for a while. This place had been in business as long as anyone I'd ever talked to could remember. It had been owned by the same family for at least three generations, some real history. Covering the walls were yellowed photographs of locally "famous" fishermen, landscape shots of the sun setting over the ocean, before and after pictures of the boardwalk during its first few prosperous years. I watched her touch the buoys and run her fingers over the lobster netting. Some places try to recreate

restaurants like this one: making them “rustic” with stained wood or dolphin statues, made in China no doubt. The Sandbar was real, and I knew Janine could tell the difference. It wasn’t in my nature to take her to a place where someone had tried to invent someone else’s memories with plywood and plastic.

A waitress popped her head in from the main dining room, “Know where you want to sit?” she asked.

“Yeah, we’re going to grab a table outside. You know, if there’s room.”

The place was deserted. My humor was lost on her; she just shrugged and trotted away. *Oh well*, I heard Janine snicker as she came up behind me, and hers was the only person’s laughter I needed.

“I assume there’s a story here, otherwise you wouldn’t have brought me.”

“*Call me Ishmael*,” I said and took her hand. I led her through the empty dining room to the deck beyond. Soon the place would be filled to the brim with more residents returning from weekendening elsewhere; Cape May, Atlantic City, Long Branch. I wanted at least a few moments alone, to hear the sound of her voice without straining over a crowd, to gaze upon her face without being joined by the eyes of others. We chose a table near the pier where, if you so desired, you could stroll out and gaze at the scenery while waiting for the chef to drown your lobster in cheap sherry before boiling it to death so as not to leave the look of horror and shock on its face.

Another bopping waitress came over to take our drink order. Janine ordered a Dewar’s on the rocks, as she had when we met. Why break tradition? I thought. “Tanqueray and tonic, with lime please.”

“You’re a purist, aren’t you?”

“When it comes to that, yes. Although I’ve been known to indulge in chick drinks under circumstances of extreme duress.”

“A good Rum Runner on the rocks is hard to come by. You should have one of those. Although, I assume you would seek out a bartender whose experience ranged beyond that of a sixteen year old.” She nodded in the direction of our waitress

who would someday make stewardess.

"So, tell me a story." She lit a cigarette and leaned forward on her elbows, took a drag and handed it to me. I took a drag and thought about what I should say. There was a story there, in that place. It carried with it both wonderful and horrific connotations. I was such a creature of habit. I was already well on my way to baring my soul a bit further, but didn't know if she wanted to know how fucked up I really was when it came to women.

"Maggie, I have no delusions about your past," she said. There she was doing it again.

"Okay." I was a writer, after all. I figured I'd tell a story, embellish here and there, and she might not even think it was true; she wouldn't have been the first. Just then the sixteen year old came, bearing drinks and a tray of a dozen raw oysters on ice. The Sandbar was infamous for their oysters. It wasn't even necessary to have them on the menu. You were automatically given a dozen as an appetizer unless you requested otherwise.

"An aphrodisiac," Janine said matter-of-factly and quite intentionally while the waitress was still within earshot.

I weaved a tale I'd relived in my head over and over for several years.

"I came here once many years ago when this place was one of my top five most visited haunts. I didn't live far from here at the time, I was renting an apartment in Belmar with a woman I thought I would grow old with."

Janine slurped an oyster and looked into my eyes as if to verify what I'd just said was true. That part was; it still made me flinch a little to bring it up. "Needless to say, we broke up."

Thoughtfully she said, "All for the best, I assume."

"Well, I wouldn't be sitting here with you, now would I?" I still wasn't sure if *that* was actually all for the best. I doubted it, but continued.

"I went into a deep depression that lasted for months. It was all I could do to show up for work every day. My days were filled with a variety of pills that ironically kept me alive instead of killing me. After about six weeks, I stopped taking pills and going to work and drank to stay drunk twenty-four hours a day. I came

here one night with a load on already, and sat at the bar with a tattered notebook that held every line, thought, and fragment I'd ever written for her or about her."

The hard part was over. Switching gears to the much better part of the story, I paused a moment for the oyster Janine held out to me like a ritualistic offering. When I went to take it from her hand, she pushed me away with a finger and held the oyster up to my lips with her own hand. I let it slide down my throat without chewing, and sucked the juice from her fingertips, feeling the eyes of the stewardess bore into the back of my head. I took a long draw from my drink and continued.

"I was young then, and didn't have the sexual history I regretfully have now. She was one of only two women I'd ever been with, barring an affair I had when I was seventeen that I try and erase from memory."

Janine tilted her head to the side, questioning without speaking.

"Another story for another time. Anyway, I got really drunk against the better advice of the bartender, who, by the way, was a guy and at least in his mid-fifties. I read page after page until I was bawling hysterically, and didn't care. This is an old man's bar more than anything, what did I care what they thought? Just then, a woman, actually more like a vision, walked in and sat about three stools away from me. She was fucking gorgeous. Everyone in the place stopped and stared, everyone except me. A beautiful woman was the last thing in the world I wanted to see, they were nothing but poison as far as I was concerned. I was wearing my glasses, and I took them off, threw them down on the bar, and buried my face in my arms.

"A few moments after, I heard an angel's voice close to my ear. 'You'll break your glasses that way,' she cooed. I stopped sobbing and looked up. She was even more beautiful close up, if you can imagine. She spoke not a word and, like a magician, twisted and bent my frames for a few minutes and placed them gently back on my face. They felt like new. 'There now, isn't that better?' she asked. Speechless for a second or two, the only words I could finally muster were 'Can I buy you a

drink?’ She ordered wine, I thought that was classy. We didn’t speak until I grew the balls to say ‘I don’t live far from here.’ She smiled, finished her wine, and grabbed her purse and my hand. As we walked out every guy in the place had his jaw on the floor. “You shouldn’t drive,’ she said. I poured myself into the passenger’s seat of her little Fiero and directed her to my apartment, amazed. The place was littered with liquor bottles and photographs torn in two. I couldn’t decide if I’d been shocked into stone cold sobriety or if I was hallucinating.”

“Are you ready to order?” the kid interrupted my reverie.

“Honey?” Janine said for the waitress’ amusement, or maybe with sincerity, I couldn’t tell.

“Cajun swordfish.” I started giggling and couldn’t stop, remembering suddenly that I was high.

“Make mine the same, and please bring us another round.” Janine kept her composure and I was afraid I’d embarrassed her.

“Go on, I’m intrigued. It’s hard for me to imagine you all broken up about something, you come off so...detached from all of that.”

Funny, I thought the same thing about her. I hoped I was equally off the mark. “Anyway, there really isn’t much to tell. We didn’t have sex, but we fooled around and made out a lot. I fell asleep in her arms and slept like never before, with...peace.”

I paused, watching her eyes to see some flicker of recognition. She must have flashed back to the previous night in my arms, because she grinned a silly grin and looked away shyly.

I finished, “When I woke up she was gone. She left a business card on my dresser. It’s likely I still have it somewhere.”

“A business card? Let me guess, she worked for an optometrist.”

“Very good, you were paying attention. Yes, that’s how she knew how to bend my frames back into shape like a magician. But, more importantly, what is the moral of this story?”

Janine drummed her fingers on the table for a few minutes. She finished her second drink and lit a cigarette, all before answering. “Sometimes bringing a complete stranger

home is the best thing that could ever happen to you.”

I was expecting a witty answer, something like ‘Never let the one that got away actually get away,’ but instead she had brought it all home for me. Subconsciously, I knew this was exactly the reason I had brought her to this place.

She was my second angel, most people aren’t lucky enough to get even one. The woman who had stumbled across me years ago did change my life. She’d made me feel whole, desirable, worth something. The day after that experience I told my ex to pack up her things and get out, much to her surprise, I might add.

It had been so many years ago, I hadn’t thought about it until that morning, with Janine, Janine Jordan for God’s sake, sitting at my kitchen table. My swinging lifestyle, cool job, and life in the Village had made me very happy, and I’d become a rather well adjusted single person. Yet, when looked at from the other side, from that side across the table at the Sandbar in Keyport, NJ, my happiness was a sham and had been for eons. I do believe people can change, but really only superficially or in minor ways. Deep down inside, where we don’t even want to know ourselves, people never really alter, not their very being, the makeup that gives us our personalities, likes, dislikes, loathings, all sorts of things that will never bend and certainly not break. I was no jet-setting dyke in the big city. I wanted a wife, I always had. Never mind the great sadness that comes with that realization. No wonder I never wanted to think about it.

The food arrived and jolted me out of my orbit around a past not often dwelt upon.

“Another round?” Either the stewardess had metamorphosed or there’d been a shift change for the dinner crowd. We took our new hottie up on her offer and delved into our swordfish. No one from a coast who doesn’t like seafood should have the privilege of having been born there.

“Well?” Janine looked pleased, and it lifted my spirits. Or the ‘spirits’ were lifting my spirits, either way I was very contented to sit there with her, although I was looking forward to stop number two.

"It's excellent. I suppose it's my turn to tell a story?"

"Not necessary. We'll have our own novel to write by the end of the day."

I noticed suddenly that we were surrounded by people. I'd been so lost in my story, and then lost in her eyes, I'd barely noticed the influx of the dinner crowd. I ate my swordfish in silence, enjoying the simple pleasure of sharing more than one meal with her over the course of only one day. The boardwalk and the romanticism that wraps around it like a blanket awaited us. However, the LA conversation was lurking in the backdrop no matter how I tried to quash it. Two more days and nights with her was all I had. I wanted to fill the next 48 hours with a million reasons for her to return to me in New York.

After dinner we stayed at the Sandbar for an hour or so, drinking and talking about books, movies, and music. I found it unbelievable that her range of knowledge was equal in all three categories and not limited to her trade. She told me she was twenty-nine and I had to grab on to the table so I didn't fall out of my chair. Not that an age difference bothered me, she just seemed older, I originally thought I was the younger one. Janine seemed to me so worldly, and I was considered pretty worldly myself.

She was highly educated. Janine had spent two years at a small, private university in Denver she'd chosen based on the reputation of its math and science curriculum. She'd studied to be an architect, and taken an opening in an exchange student program to go to Versailles for a year. After that year, she came back to the states, dropped out in Denver, and moved back home to apply to Julliard.

"I'd always been into the arts, architecture just seemed to be somehow more, I don't know, practical, I guess."

I could hardly imagine Janine ever having been practical.

"Anyway," she told me, "after a year in Versailles, being exposed to that culture, I decided to go for what I really wanted, and that was to paint."

There was no end to her surprises. "I didn't even know I could sing until Julliard."

Amazing, I thought to myself. “Do you still paint?”

“Do you still write?” she responded. *Quid pro quo*. The check arrived reluctantly, the longer we stayed the bigger the tip, our new waitress was no fool. I doubled the tip anyway, she was much better than the teenagers she succeeded.

I made the most amazing time between Keyport and Lavalette and silently commended myself for remembering several side street short cuts. We’d lost the signal of the New York radio stations hours ago, and Janine flipped the tuner before landing on a pop charts station. Cruising the strip, with eyes peeled for a parking spot, I felt teenagey all over again.

Who was I kidding? This woman couldn’t possibly be amused by roller coasters and skeeball tables after Versailles and Julliard. Then again, she had suggested going fishing, so this idea didn’t seem too much of a stretch when it came to comparing intellectual stimulation. As I rounded the court at the end of the beach to search for parking on the other side of the strip, Janine’s song came blaring out of the speakers.

She reached out an arm and snapped the radio off without comment. I thought better of commenting myself. Giving up, I drove a while longer and paid the outrageous amount of \$15 for the privilege of parking in a lot where I’d be lucky not to have my stereo stolen.

“When was the last time you were here?” she asked.

“Four years ago,” I said without effort. I’d been home from Illinois for a visit. An ex of mine nearly ran me over with a shopping cart in the supermarket of my hometown. We hadn’t seen each other since before my move, and this ex happened to be one that was not gotten over easily. It was like a movie that went with that Dan Folgerberg “Auld Lang Syne” song. We went to our separate homes, unpacked our groceries, met at a bar, and left one car behind. Four hours later, we were naked in a hotel room with a Jacuzzi surrounded by our winnings from the boardwalk. That night she’d broken my heart a second time.

“What are you thinking about?”

She didn’t know? “About how much I want to kiss you right now,” I said, and then did.

"I've only ever been to Coney Island," she said. *No wonder*, I thought to myself. Between Versailles and Julliard, when would she have had the time?

"This is great, I love stuff like this. I hope that's not what you're worried about, why you're so quiet all of a sudden. As a matter of fact, it's just this kind of thing that will make me fall in love with you, you know."

She kissed me again, and I resented her joking about falling in love. But I didn't want to be a mope, so I smiled and got out to open the door for her. When I held out my hand to her, she pulled me into the passenger's side, leaving me with one foot on the gravel, a knee on the floor mat, and my torso sandwiched between her knees. She kissed me hungrily and reached a hand between my legs, and I was suddenly very sorry for wearing jeans. I was unaware of anything or any passer-by, only the animalistic way she groped me and the fear that I was going to come right then and there.

Janine surpassed normal human existence; she was like a fiery ball comprised entirely of energy and electromagnetic fields, passing from moment to moment not moved or touched by the laws of earth or society. This adrenaline charged sexual being wrapped in skin controlled me, and any innermost desire I didn't even know I had. Breathless and wet, it took whatever energy remained to break away from her before I really did come in my jeans.

"Are you always like this?" I asked.

"I want you," was her only response.

Incredible. "I want you too, Janine, I just tend to be more particular about time and place."

"Why?"

I had to think about it. Why not right there, right then, in my car in the back of a parking lot?

"Isn't it, I don't know, better if we wait? Until later, when we're home for the night? Baby, I'm willing to do whatever you want, over and over again, I'd just rather be in a more comfortable place, or maybe in more comfortable clothes."

She snaked around me to get out of the car and lit a

cigarette.

“Please don’t be angry.”

“I’m not angry, Maggie, I can wait. However, in the meantime, let’s talk.” She kissed me much more gently and said, “God, I love talking with you. I am trying to teach you a valuable lesson.”

When we became student and teacher must have happened while I was daydreaming because I failed to notice the transition.

“Let’s walk down on the beach first.” Following behind her in a daze, I knew that, even if I had no desire for her at all, I was going to make love to her under the boardwalk because she wanted me to. Maybe she was a witch. I’d been under the sexual control of a woman before, but this was somehow more ethereal, more Zen-like. She wanted to teach me something and I was willing to be taught, whether she was an angel of heaven or hell made no difference.

We stopped at a Tiki bar on the pier and got two Budweisers in plastic cups; the staple cocktail of the Jersey shoreline. Walking down the wooden ramp to the sand, I noticed from the moment we emerged from the parking lot, she hadn’t touched me at all, not even so much as a brush of her hand against mine when she went to grab her cup from the counter. My blood still boiled in my loins from the sheer sensation of denim against my bare clit. (I wasn’t one for undergarments.) Without any effort at all, she forced me to want her more with each second that passed, it was unnerving but riveting.

“What did you learn from Blake?” she asked, patting a patch of beach beside her under the pylons of the pier. I took an enormous swallow of beer and tried to separate my intellectualism from my sexuality. Then, like an epiphany, the realization hit me that I should not be separating the two at all.

“I learned the absurdity of socialization. As humans, we are living proof of all of life’s contradictions and, also as humans, it is our job to resolve them.”

“Correct,” she announced as she changed her position so we were facing each other, her legs bent over my own. The rush

came back again at the feel of her skin against mine, even clothed as we were.

"So, if you realize the absurdity of socialization, why, then, would you think it was wrong to make love in a car in a parking lot?" She dipped a finger into my beer and then ran it over my lips.

"I didn't say I thought it was wrong. I guess I don't really know what I was thinking. I want to make the next couple of days last as long as possible."

"Yes," she said as she pulled off her shirt. "But in the greater realm of things, what if the next few days were all we had, all any of us have? Then you would wish you had done more."

I reached out to touch her breasts but kept speaking. "It is the desire to have more time that makes us have so little." I gently brushed the hair back from her face and exposed a singular tear running down the side of her cheek.

She kissed my open palm and continued, "Do you believe as Blake did that we are all fundamentally evil?"

I unbuttoned my shirt down to my navel. "Yes," I said, "because according to Blake evil and desire are one and the same, which also means evil is inherently a myth."

I felt as if I were in a dreamlike state, never before had I experienced the culmination of philosophy and sexual anticipation, it was exhilarating but somehow deeply tragic, and I felt my own tears well up in spite of my breathless heat. When I went to wipe them away, Janine held my hands to her chest and kissed me with desperation.

She whispered in my ear, "There should be no shame in the face of desire. Do you remember why religion and life are in such contradiction to each other?"

"Yes," I breathed softly. She pushed me back onto the sand, straddled me, and unzipped my jeans.

"Tell me."

This was the most mind-blowing foreplay I had ever experienced, I lack the words to express it. Suddenly, though, clear thinking arose to my lips without effort and I paraphrased Blake to the best of my ability as she lightly stroked me, still constricted by denim.

“All religious codes are based on the idea that the mind and body are separate.”

And, I know now that they most certainly are not, I thought to myself.

“That energy, also known as desire, and still further known as evil, comes from the body. Logic and reason, otherwise known as good, come from the soul.”

Relentlessly I unbuttoned her jeans and rolled on top of her. She tugged at my belt loops and begged me to go on.

“But, Blake set out to prove that ‘man has no body distinct from his soul.’”

I couldn’t talk anymore. We became involved in a struggle that rivaled that of good and evil. Somehow, we managed to completely unclothe each other over the next few seconds that seemed an eternity. I swear I heard a distant rumbling of thunder, and the sounds of the tide reached my ears in an onslaught of my senses. Over and over we rolled, never breaking away from each other’s lips, alternating between rubbing and sliding fingers in and out of each other’s bodies. She bit my lower lip so hard our kisses erotically mingled with blood. Anticipating release mounted like terror and I dug my nails into her spine like an animal that was unrecognizable but nevertheless an integral part of me. Sex had become a war in which it ceased to matter who won; the victor and victim would be equally triumphant.

Laying side by side, a virtual kamikaze of flailing arms and legs, she put her lips to my ear one last time and breathed a final extract from a “Song of Experience,” “*Those who restrain desire do so because theirs is weak enough to be restrained.*”

I met the challenge by coming so hard I swear I ejaculated like a man. Only a fraction of a second later, Janine followed with a small yelp and collapsed into my arms, battle won, Janine: 1, Maggie: 0. For a moment I thought the earth would open up and swallow us both and I didn’t care.

Teach me a lesson she did: all we are comprised of as a human race are blood, cum, sweat, and tears, everything we do and everything we are can be reduced to four everyday

elements. Or perhaps this wasn't a creed for the whole world and everyone in it, but it was, if nothing else, what this complicated relationship would come to be based upon. My desire for her would never be restrained because it was too great.

I cradled her in my arms and wept silently. No ideas arose of how I would cope once these days were over and my life returned to normal. But, angel of mercy as she was, Janine transformed herself into her carefree spirit mode and said, "Tomorrow we can cover the Marquis de Sade."

Laughing in spite of myself, I arose and pulled her to her feet. Nightfall had overtaken us during our lust-frenzied war, and we gently wiped dried sand from each other's bodies slowly and languorously in the moonlight glimmering off the waves.

Dressed and parched, we discarded our long ago knocked over cups of beer and headed to the Aztec, another long-standing monument on the boardwalk. She rarely let go of my hand as we made our way through the crowds, which was a tremendous delight to someone like me who cherishes feeling needed. I wanted desperately to tell her I'd never in my life had sex like that before, but was afraid she would not repeat my words. She probably knew anyway. Upon entering the Aztec, there was Janine's song again blaring out from the jukebox.

"Two drafts please," I said to the bartender. "Does it bother you?" I asked.

"Sometimes. I mean, it's just one song, but a hit song epitomizes the whole rock star dilemma. Sure, you want to be successful, but then there's that nagging commercialism versus artistic integrity."

"Well, we all need to make a living. At least you're making one doing something you love." I had always been too lazy to dedicate my life to writing. It was much easier to publish once in a while and still know I had a weekly salary to depend on.

"I worry about success. I don't want to become one of those artists on TV claiming that the pressure became too overwhelming so I turned to sex and drugs and threw it all away. Although, I think I did that long before a hit song. Long before I was even a singer."

“Long live sex, drugs, and rock and roll. It’s an American past time, you should just enjoy it.”

“I do.” She looked thoughtfully into her beer mug. “You know, you’re the first person I’ve met since this newfound success who allows me to forget who I am. This is the first time you’ve even mentioned my career. It’s nice to have someone see me as a real, everyday person.”

“Janine, I will never see you as an everyday person. I’ve never met anyone like you, or that knows the things you do in the way you do.” I paused for a moment and decided to get it over with.

“I don’t like to think about who you really are because then I have to think about what that means for me.”

“I can’t make promises. But I will say this; it pisses me off a little that you assume that what happened on the beach not more than an hour ago is some sort of standard practice for me. Is it so difficult to imagine I have feelings too? Maybe even feelings for you? Do you have any idea how hard it is to be who I am and find people who can recite Blake’s theories on religion from memory?”

Yes, I did. I had a hard time finding people like that myself.

“I guess we’ve been looking too hard or just in the wrong places. I’m sorry.” Sorry as I was, I couldn’t help but smile. It was possible after all, that whatever this was could somehow, some way, continue beyond the looming LA trip.

“Okay then. As long as we understand each other.” She laughed. “As if *that* were humanly possible.”

Chapter 3

When Janine left for LA two days later, I became solid steel. We said goodbye at my apartment like old friends, and I assumed the several times she made mention of when we would see each other again was just her way of being polite.

“Too Much Trouble” had been steadily climbing its way up the Billboard charts, she would be in greater and greater demand with each passing day. I was grateful I’d had my three days, it was a nice story I’d get to tell my friends. Beyond that, I convinced myself I expected nothing, regardless of how I felt, or imagined she might feel. Those few days and nights had been magical, but the real world was waiting just outside the door.

Who was I kidding, that day at beach, imagining the relationship would continue beyond our 3-day weekend? It was easier, simpler, and much less painful to pretend it never happened. I set about a rigorous course of action to forget her that included overtime at work and more alcohol consumption and one night stands than usual. Trying to forget someone I had feelings for wasn’t new territory for me, I had a lot of practice over the years. But Janine was very hard to shake. I stopped listening to the radio, her song was everywhere. I was in Pandora’s Box in the village and it was on the damn jukebox. One day at work Jan strolled in wearing a Joan Orlean shirt she’d purchased the night of the party. I felt the universe was fucking with me, and I didn’t like it one bit.

About ten days after we’d said goodbye, I came home from work and a stuffed manila envelope fell to the floor as I was sifting through my mail. The return address was somewhere in LA. I sunk to the floor and started to cry, Janine had not forgotten me after all. Smiling through my tears, laughing at my silly attempts to deny what I felt, I tore open the package. The first thing to fall out was a CD single of “Too Much Trouble” with Janine’s script in black magic marker sprawling across the cover that read, “To my Jersey girl.” If that had been all the package contained, I would have been overjoyed, but there was more. A photograph from a shoot for the next album cover showed

Janine half smiling at the camera with the boys in the band surrounding her on all sides. A sheaf of cocktail napkins with random lines and paragraphs of poetry, and a note on the last napkin that said, "You're helping me finish this when I get home." And, finally, a brief letter:

Darling Maggie,

I am sure the moment I walked out the door you thought you would never hear from me. My dear girl, so scarred from past betrayals, I understand your fears. It seems so unfair that the moment I found you, this corporate world of music wants to swallow me whole. I never really wanted to be a rock star.

I think about you every moment alone I can steal. There is something deep within me that wants to tell you all my secrets. I'm sorry I haven't called, it is hard for me to get away on my own for any length of time. I just keep thinking of how much sweeter it will be the next time I get to see you. I wish I could see your face when you opened the package. You probably had that little grin that starts at one corner of your mouth and spreads across your face like an artist's hand.

Soon, Janine

I wished desperately I could pick up the phone and call her, but outside of the city I had no idea where she was or how to reach her. I knew inside I would see her again, I just didn't know when. But the mere fact she was going to come back amazed me, so much that I had what I believed was a small panic attack. Not knowing how else to medicate anything from the flu to rabies, I poured myself a tall glass of single malt scotch with shaky hands. Now what? I sat down at my kitchen counter, grabbed the phone, and called my best friend in the whole world, Cindy.

An hour later we were at Sea Salt in the village sharing a pitcher of Long Island iced tea and an enormous cob salad. "I can't believe you didn't call me sooner," she complained.

"Cin, this whole thing only happened less than a couple of weeks ago. Sometimes we go for months without talking to each other."

"I know, I know. Listen, I've known you since we were little kids in Milltown. And I'll tell you something. That look that's on your face right now? I haven't seen that since Ellen Trainer when we were in the fifth grade."

"And what look is that?" I asked. "Terrified? Tortured? Obsessed?"

"Smitten," she grinned. "It's cute."

Cindy and I had known each other practically since birth. It was fair to say she knew me better than anyone did, and I trusted her opinion. When I had moved away to the cornfields of Illinois, she was one of less than a half dozen people I maintained contact with besides relatives on the coast. She had done everything I had ever been afraid to do: she was in a rock band when she was 20 and they actually were achieving some local success, but she walked away from that to travel with the Peace Corps for a few years, then she met some sort of guru on a retreat weekend and followed him to live with Buddhist monks in Tibet for a year. She came back to the States and, of all things, went to law school, and now she worked for an elite firm in upper Manhattan.

She was one of the most interesting people I'd ever had the pleasure of knowing, and one of a very limited number of women in my life I had not slept with, thereby maintaining the sanctity of our relationship. I trusted her above anyone else, and I had to tell someone about Janine.

"You know how I feel about bisexual women," I said. "Nothing but trouble." I looked down into my glass.

"Well, it's not like you just found that out. You knew going in. You always do that, and then want to use it as an excuse later on to bail. I also know you're enlightened enough to understand it doesn't really matter. *People* fall in love with *people*, all that gender driven sexuality crap is a bunch of bullshit."

Of course she was right. I was often drawn to women who were unavailable to me for one reason or another, and being bisexual was my favorite choice. It gave me a way to not commit and an easy out when intimacy became too intense or complicated for my liking. I liked to find women who were

emotionally unavailable because, really, it was me who was afraid, me who was unavailable. Cindy knew me too well.

“Yeah, but Cin, I mean, come on. She’s a fucking rock star, for Christ’s sake. That’s a whole new level of unattainable for me. What will I do, sit home and watch porn and hang out with the cat while she’s on tour in Japan, or Australia, or God knows where?”

She gave me the look all best friends have. The one that says, “I know the truth about you.” She lit a cigarette with a match. I found this endearing about her. Cindy was a woman who could afford Zippo lighters made out of gold if she wanted one, yet she was always rummaging through her purse to find a match. She was also constantly quitting smoking, but never quite managed to do it, like it was a project she kept putting off.

“The truth, kiddo, is you have strayed farther and farther from your true self ever since you ended things with Liz. That was nearly ten years ago, for God’s sake. I won’t say just get over it already because I know, I *know* it was the most painful thing you have ever been through. I know she was the only woman you ever really loved. But just because that didn’t work out doesn’t give you license to abandon the hope of ever being happy.”

I flinched when she mentioned Liz, still, after all those years. But it was true, that relationship ending changed me profoundly, and I still wasn’t over it. Or maybe I was, but it was easier to lament the past than face an uncertain future. The end of my one and only failed marriage proposal had come to be something that defined me, built in to my personality and carried into my other romantic relationships.

As if on cue, she said, “You have a chance here to not bring that memory with you. It’s a new day, my friend. And you’ve got to admit, no matter what happens, it’s damn exciting stuff. This is what we live for! I remember when you were someone who believed in that, fate and chance and the value of experience...what happened to you, Maggie?”

I’ve just become a cynical, emotionally shut down alcoholic, I thought to myself. “I don’t know Cin, I just don’t know.” I started to cry a little without any kind of internal warning.

Embarrassed, I excused myself and went to the restroom. I splashed some cold water on my face and took a long hard look in the mirror and thought, *Jesus, what is happening to me?* I knew the answer. Janine had really gotten to me, deep down under my skin. I didn't know how, but I knew it had happened. Yes, it could absolutely be fate, or a past life connection, or something equally esoteric. Whatever it was, I knew Cindy was right, and whatever was going to happen with Janine was like a runaway train, and there was no stopping it.

When I got back to the table Cindy hugged me. "You know, I know you're right, and, in the end, someone will probably get hurt, maybe you, maybe her. But I also know you would spend the rest of your life wishing you'd taken the chance if you didn't. Do this for yourself, Maggie. Stop pretending you have some pre-determined path of being alone forever. Fate is what we make it."

We settled the bill and walked around the village for a while, stopped in Rebel Rebel to browse, then got some cappuccino on the way to the parking deck where Cindy's Lexus looked out of place in the halogen lights of the dingy garage, like a high-class prostitute in a dive bar. I loved that Cindy didn't allow her success or her money to turn her into someone else. She was still genuinely kind, she gave a lot of her money away to various charities, and still volunteered at a domestic violence shelter twice a week. The only thing she didn't have was the same as me, a partner with whom to share it all. But Cindy's case was much different than mine. She had found her true love, Joe, on the last leg of her international flight coming home from Tibet. They had a whirlwind romance and got married after only a year, it was the most beautiful wedding I had ever attended. From the moment she walked into the church, her husband locked eyes with her, and I swear never looked at anything or anyone else for the remainder of the ceremony. Never before had I known two people so much in love, so utterly devoted to each other. Then, one night, he left their Upper East Side walk-up to go to the corner bodega for a pack of smokes and was run down by a drunk driver. It was the most tragic thing that had ever

happened to someone I knew. Cindy wouldn't even talk about it for two solid years.

She was done looking for romance. She said Joe had given her the happiest days of her life, and she knew she would always compare other men to him and that wasn't fair to anyone. So, through her personal brand of spirituality and a lot of soul searching, she had found ways to make peace with it. I admired her and I was proud to call her my friend.

The Lexus rolled to a stop in front of my building. "So, I just have one question for you," she said.

"Oh, yeah, what's that?"

"When do I get to meet her?" I just stood there and smiled.

* * * *

"Maggie, come to Pete's office. Maggie to Pete's office, please."

I looked up to see everyone staring at me. Usually when you were paged to the big boss's office it was because you were in trouble. I wasn't, as far as I knew. I got up, ignored the ogling co-workers, and walked to the front of the offices.

"Yeah Pete?" I popped my head into his suite I envied, more than a little. Although, I didn't really want the responsibility that came with the suite.

"Come in. Close the door." He didn't seem upset but he was always difficult to read.

I sat down in front of his desk. "What's up?"

"Maggie, we just landed a really big contract with Wolf Creek Records."

I froze. Wolf Creek was Janine's label.

"Apparently they want us to do the entire layout for the next Blue Is record, although they don't quite know when that will be yet. In the meantime they contracted us for design and lyric typesetting for five other bands."

He looked at me, waiting for me to say something. I wasn't sure how to feel, let alone what to say.

"I'm just wondering why it is you were requested

specifically to manage these projects. Is there anything you want to tell me?"

He waited. Pete was a nice guy and a good boss. Since I'd never been in this position, I wasn't sure what the next right thing to do was. I mean, it would be one thing if I were sleeping with the actual client, but Janine wasn't the client, she was the singer *represented* by the client, surely that was a loophole in any sort of conflict of interest mandate.

"Maggie, relax, you aren't in any kind of trouble."

Only then did I realize I'd been holding my breath. I exhaled slowly. "Oh. Okay, that's good, I mean, you know I love my job."

"I just have one question," he said. I knew exactly what he was going to say next.

"When do I get to meet her?"

* * * *

I asked my boss to keep the information between us, and I trusted him to do so. I knew if everyone found out, I would become a backseat in every single conversation. My life as I knew it would become completely boring to my colleagues and they would only ever ask questions about Janine. I shuddered to think of it. I was painfully aware there was a part of me that didn't want her to succeed for that very reason. It was incredibly selfish of me and I knew it. I thought someone should start a support group for the Nobody partners of famous people.

One night about a week after the package, I came home and Janine was on my doorstep. It was one of those snapshot moments, filed in your memory cells for instant recall. I came walking around the corner, and there she was, wearing jeans and a spaghetti strap tank top, not looking like a famous or about-to-be famous person at all. She looked just like any other girlfriend, waiting for me to get home.

"How's work?" she called out to me, smiling. "Anything interesting happen this week?"

I dropped everything I was carrying onto the steps and

kissed her. "I missed you," I whispered into her hair. "How long are you here?"

"We can talk about all that later. I want to take you out to dinner."

I assumed that meant not long. I was going to have to get used to this, I supposed. But it sure did feel good for her to hook her fingers through my belt loop and pull me toward her for another kiss.

"*Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world...*" I started to joke.

"Oh, come on, you wouldn't really have wanted me to walk into anyone else's, would you?" She was right. But I couldn't shake the feeling our relationship was going to look a lot more like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* than *Casablanca*.

"Let me cook for you instead?"

"What's on the menu?"

"Linguine. Clam sauce."

"Red or white?"

"White, why?"

"Do you have a nice bottle of Friuli Sauvignon? Never mind. Of course you do. And if you don't, I'm sure you've got something just as nice stashed away."

As we climbed the stairs, I wondered how much she knew about wine. Was it as much as she seemed to know about everything else? Her capacity for knowledge amazed me; hell, everything about her amazed me. But the greatest miracle was that she was here, standing smack in the middle of my life. In that moment, holding the door for her, I was suddenly struck with the feeling that it didn't matter to me who she was, how famous she was, how often she was away, who else she slept with, or anything else she did. I was making a conscious decision to love, for it is only when love is a choice that it even has a chance. Those addictive emotions of fascination, falling head over heels, even obsession, would always give way when the people in the relationship acted as their adult selves. I wanted something much more real than that. I decided right then and there that when the going got rough, as surely it would, for the first time in

my life I wouldn't run. I wouldn't abandon her or my heart's desire, which had in an instant become one and the same.

* * * *

While I prepared dinner, she told me all about her LA trip, working at the Wolf Creek studios out there, how it was different from New York. With each little success, there were people higher up in the industry to meet and to appease.

"It's frustrating, you know? Me and the guys, we just want to make music. While we're doing that, there's some guy in a suit telling you the song needs to have another chorus, or the bridge is too long, or something needs to be six bars and not eight, and so on."

I couldn't imagine anyone putting any kind of restraint on what she did, but I supposed if you wanted to be successful you had to follow *some* rules.

We sat down together and ate mostly in silence. I kept admiring her in the flicker of candlelight. She asked me if I had to work tomorrow and I said yes. "Can I see you again after work?"

I chuckled. Seriously? "That depends. Will you make dinner tomorrow?"

"Can we make homemade pizza together? My brothers and I did that when we were little with our parents. I miss it, and haven't done it in a long time. I would like to do something nostalgic with you."

I knew she meant because I had done something nostalgic with her, by taking her to Keyport.

"Do you see your family? Are they local?" I cleaned up, put leftovers away, and did the dishes. I could get used to her being in my home all the time.

"One brother lives in San Francisco now, so I try and see him when I'm out west. My other brother lives in Denver. My parents are still here, upstate in a beautiful house in the mountains, close to the Pennsylvania border. I am the only one that insisted on staying in the city. I talk with my brothers on the phone once in a while, the one in Denver has a family and I have

two nephews, but we don't really know each other, he moved there with his wife for his job a long time ago. I'm closer to my brother out west, he's a bit of a man-whore and still likes to party. He went out there to go to school, then decided that wasn't really for him but he loved Cali so much that he stayed."

I waited for her to continue. "My mom and dad are...good, they're good. I go up and visit occasionally. They don't understand what I do, at all, but they know I'm happy doing it, and that makes them happy. I don't think they will be happy about me being with a woman, but they'll get over it. I've done much worse." She smiled.

I could only imagine what the "much worse" was.

"I didn't mean it like that," she said, reading my mind again like she knew I was a little offended.

"They're just old-fashioned."

She got up from the table and crossed the floor to where I stood at the sink. Gently touching my face, she kissed me slowly, searching. She looked behind me at the clock on the wall. It was 8:00.

"Wanna go to bed early?"

* * * *

It was difficult for me to leave her in the morning, but I am very much a workaholic. I kissed her goodbye and asked her to lock up on her way out. I was distracted all day and felt like a teenager, smiling and giggling to myself. The night before, our lovemaking was heated and intense, lasting long into the night. It was not quite how it had been during the first quickie on the couch, and it was also not like it had been on the beach. I liked that it always seemed different. Since it seemed we had each un-vocally decided to keep seeing each other, there seemed a higher level of intimacy. When we first went to bed my hands were shaking when I touched her. I couldn't remember the last time that happened, if ever. I also liked that she was like me, equally comfortable in the role of dominant or submissive, gentle or rough, demanding or acquiescent. It was as if we had known

each other's bodies for years, I'd never had that kind of chemistry with anyone before. It was strange; sex seemed almost spiritual, euphoric in a way I couldn't quite describe. The sex, the relationship, it was all new but it seemed to be going so well, I was actually shocked. It was...bliss.

My bliss abruptly ended that evening. I got home, set out all the bread, sauce, and toppings, waiting for her to appear as she had the day before. When she hadn't shown at my apartment by 9 PM, I ran out of patience and called her. No answer. I got angry, unpredictable was one thing; it was cute, even alluring. But unreliable was not. I called Cindy, who only said to me, "Well, you're powerless over her, aren't you? Getting mad about it won't change that."

I did some quiet meditation and had a nice glass of scotch. Although tempted to have many more glasses, I took some Melatonin and went to bed. At 3:00 AM my phone rang. With a sinking feeling I answered.

"Hello?"

"*Anything worth having is worth suffering for, isn't it?*" I recognized her voice first and the line from *Days of Wine and Roses* second. Jesus. She's waking me up at 3 AM loaded and still she quotes movies.

"Janine. It's 3 AM. What happened to you?" I had gone to bed angry, but the moment I heard her voice it all went away. I didn't like that, not one bit, it gave her a lot of control without my permission.

"Baby doll, I'm soooo sorry! Some friends showed up, and I went out for a while, and one thing led to another, and, well, I guess I'm still out. I'm pretty drunk."

Duh. "And it didn't occur to you to call until now?" I hated how that sounded, chiding and shaming.

"The night got away from me. I'm really drunk. And really high."

"You said that already."

"Can I take a cab and come to you? I need you."

And there it was. It didn't matter what time it was or what she'd done, my desire to be near her canceled everything. I

knew this was bad. I knew I would let her walk all over me. But what if she didn't want to? I mean, this was a first offense, right? Maybe she just made a mistake. And so the first brick in the foundation of my denial was cemented into place.

"Okay."

When the cab rolled up in front of my apartment I had to help her out of it, and I had to pay the driver. I carried her up the stairs, kicked the door closed behind me, and gently put her down on my couch.

"What am I going to do with you, kiddo?"

"Is there any pizza left?" she asked.

"You know, I held out hope you would still show up until like ten. Stupid, foolish, I guess."

She kissed me in response. Then she pulled away and started to cry. "I was afraid," she said.

"Afraid of what?"

"How I feel. I remembered we had plans, Maggie; I blew you off on purpose. Then I went out with my friends to try to forget you, but I couldn't."

"Why?"

"I told you. I'm afraid. I don't know if I've ever been in love, Maggie. But I know I've thought I was. And it always goes bad. Always. Like I'm just incapable or something. I always do this thing, I...I..."

"Self-sabotage?" I offered.

"Yeah. I guess you'd call it that. You scare the hell out of me."

"You scare me too, but I keep showing up for this. Don't you think I worry? Don't you think I tried to forget you when you were in LA? I know where you're career is going...you could have anyone you wanted. That frightens me. But when I see you I forget all that. I can't help it Janine, I want to be with you. I don't know how to do this either, I never have. I'm a self-sabotager myself. I'm mostly a garden variety drunk who got lucky with a great job and a cool place to live, but I really am just very lost most of the time."

I got quiet for a moment. "Are you even going to remember this conversation tomorrow?"

She smiled. "The cab ride was sobering. It still amazes me we don't hear about more cabby accidents and fatalities."

"Honey. Listen to me. You are maybe the only woman I have been with where I haven't been anyone but me from the very first night. You make me feel naked, and vulnerable, and crazy. I think maybe that's what love is, I don't know. The world is insane. What I want more than anything is to stand with you, holding your hand, beneath a sheltering sky, letting passion run its due course. Maybe we will be a disaster. But maybe not, anything is possible. I'm not much of a religious person, but I do think in spiritual terms sometimes, and it seems to me that this—you, me, us—is, I don't know how else to say it—meant to be, meant to happen. I feel like I have looked for you my whole life, even when I didn't know I was searching. Like you...*just reached in, and put a string of lights around my heart.*" I'd been waiting for the right moment to get a *Desert Hearts* quote into my conversations with Janine.

"Best dyke movie ever," she said. "But I've got a better one for this moment. *When Harry Met Sally*. '*When you realize you want to spend the rest of your life with somebody, you want the rest of your life to start as soon as possible.*' I'm so sorry about tonight. Can you forgive me?"

"If you tell me we can try, that we can be honest with each other. Then yes."

"Okay. Let's do this. You get to be you and I get to be me, for better or worse." She hugged me. "You're not going to like me very much tomorrow."

"You're right." I said. "But I will have forgiven you by mid-afternoon."

"We have a show at CBGB's in three weeks. Will you come?"

My rock and roll girlfriend. Unbelievable. But this was happening. I had no idea what to expect, I was only glad in that moment she was there. I could look into her eyes, I could smell her perfume, she was, just then, undeniably *mine*. Maybe what I had said was true, I had been looking for her my whole life. I just knew I was willing to try, no matter what, I was willing to try and make this work.

Chapter 4

I dragged Cindy out of the house in the middle of her 70-hour work week to go to CBGBs with me. We got there early and sat at the bar, listening to a newly formed punk band founded in Bayonne, New Jersey. They were good, but it was obvious they were trying too hard to be The Sex Pistols. This is why most bands fail; they can't create something new and original. It can be argued, of course, that all bands have influences and "it's all been done before." But if you wanted to sign and produce, you had to have something special. The Blue Is had Janine. Special indeed.

When the second band, another, slightly improved punk-pop trio, was clearing their equipment, my girlfriend came bouncing up to the bar behind me and Cindy. "I'm so glad you're here!" She threw her arms around me and kissed me, I melted as usual. I was so attracted to her it often frightened me, and it seemed to be getting stronger, which was worrisome since I didn't know if it worked both ways. She ordered a Dewar's and perched on the barstool next to Cindy.

"It's nice to finally meet you; Maggie has told me so much about you."

Cindy took her hand and kissed it. "I wish I could say the same, but Maggie has been keeping you under wraps, she says very little." She winked at me.

I had told her very little, but not because I was keeping anything to myself, it was because I knew I didn't have to. Cindy had been reading me like a book for many years and there was rarely an explanation or clarification needed. Janine and I had seen each other as often as we could after the night she drunk-dialed me and came over. As predicted, I had forgiven her by midday, probably by mid-morning.

She spent most of her time rehearsing with the band and writing, and if not those two things she was with me most of the time. I hadn't "dated" in so long I'd almost forgotten what it was like, getting dressed, checking yourself out in the mirror, carrying breath freshener in your pocket. My dates with Janine included sitting in on some rehearsals, meeting the other members of the

band and their significant others, and the occasional dinner and a movie. There were no recurrences of her behavior the night she blew me off, at least not yet. I had gained equal access to her home as much as my own, it all felt uncomfortably normal.

The three of us chatted for a short time, then she had to go do what musicians do: set up equipment, sound check, go talk to herself in the dressing room...in truth, I didn't exactly know. When the lights went down, we moved to a table closer to the stage. Cindy leaned across the table and patted my hand, "Let's see what she's got. I want to see what pushed you so head over heels."

Watching her on the stage was exciting, inspiring, erotic, heartbreaking, all at the same time. It reminded me of when I used to hang out in strip clubs and I had a large circle of friends who did it for a living. Once I knew them well enough, I could see distinct differences in their stripper personas and their true personalities, it was fascinating. I knew when Janine was playing to the audience, seducing them, "prowling the stage" as had been said of The Pretenders' Chrissie Hynde. She dominated them, I watched the crowd watch her, mesmerized, awed at her passion. I knew from other singers I'd met that the band can't really see anyone beyond the second or third row because of the stage lights. I also knew that meant Janine could see me, and I loved it. A few times she looked right at me, sang to me, seduced me.

Most of the songs I recognized, they were all from the same album that contained "Too Much Trouble," which I was certain would be the closing number.

Original or not, all concerts still adhered to a certain pattern, it's just an unwritten rule: if you have a hit, you play it last. If you have several, you scatter them throughout the show, saving the best-liked for last. Unless, of course, you were Van Morrison, who was quoted saying, "If you want to hear Brown-Eyed Girl, just go buy the record."

About three quarters of the way through the show, the band huddled for a minute. Janine came back to the microphone and said, "We're going to do a new one. We're not actually sure

that we're ready, but we're gonna try!" The crowd went wild, it was 11 PM now and beginning to get crowded.

I looked across the table at Cindy, out of place with her fur coat and dry martini in the middle of CBGBs. She smiled at me and mouthed the words, "I see." I wondered if Cindy was drunk, she never seemed to be. She probably drank one to my every three. She had never said anything about my alcohol intake, but I knew she knew, and I knew she would if it started to affect me in irreversible ways. So far, it hadn't. But we both knew I drank increasingly in the past ten years, and I was no longer a binge drinker. I panicked when alcohol ran low in my house, and I'd begun to keep an eye on the supply at Janine's. Of course, I spoke not one word of this to anyone.

The set went dark save a single spotlight on Janine. The song began with a soft symbol riff, shortly followed by a heavy, melodic rhythm that could only come from an upright bass. The whole place grew eerily silent as Janine began,

"Don't tell me...don't tell me she's gone...gone away, she shared that bed you made...lying safe with you..." and just a few bars later,

"Take all your fears and crying off the wire...and set it all on fire..." and I knew I recognized it. That sheaf of cocktail napkins in the very first package she sent me from LA. She had never gotten around to asking me to finish it as she had threatened, but had apparently revisited it, worked on it, and perfected it all on her own without ever mentioning it.

Cindy leaned over into my ear, "This is for you, isn't it?"

I just smiled, embarrassed. But something else struck me, something sad, something that knew she was a part of me now, and I was a part of her. I knew that, despite what might be genuine love, Janine and I were both tragic figures, and tragic figures always come to tragic ends.

* * * *

There comes a time in every bi girl's life when she will come across a bold lesbian who will introduce her to taboo

matters of sex. On a crisp, clean, October morning, I drank my first cup of coffee and decided Janine had arrived at the summit, and I would approach the topic that evening. We had been seeing each other for about five months.

I watched her pick at my freshly made gumbo and flip through the day's Billboard charts from across her dining room table. Behind her a bay window overlooked the Promenade, I could see couples in swarms out to see the view, walking dogs, contemplating, professing love, all with the rhythmic soundtrack of the traffic on the Brooklyn Queens Expressway just below.

There was no way to begin coyly, I thought, I might as well just spit it out.

"Janine?"

"Yes, baby?" she said, glancing up from her charts.

"Um, the women you've been with in the past, did you ever, um...have you ever tried...eh..."

"Just ask, sugar. What is it?"

"Janine, have you ever had sex with a strap-on?"

She choked on her gumbo and dropped her fork, splattering rice across the blue cyan linoleum as it hit.

"Oh, Christ, wait a minute."

She stood up so fast I was surprised the chair was left standing in her wake. I understood this reaction to be a "no." While she rinsed off her fork after wiping up the mess with a paper towel, she looked over her shoulder at me, "Well, why? Do you want me to?"

"Yes. But if you don't want to, I'll understand. And I'll never bring it up again."

"Well, I just, I mean, what's wrong with the sex we have now?"

"Nothing at all. I'm perfectly content. I've just been thinking about it is all."

As she passed me back to her chair, I grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her onto my lap. I had embarrassed her, and myself. I'd mistakenly assumed she was adventurous enough to have tried it at least once.

I brushed her hair away from her eyes. She started to say,

"I just don't understand what the big deal is," but I stopped her at "the."

"Shut up honey," I said and kissed her. I held onto her, and continued to kiss her until I felt her pulse quicken and heard her breathing become more rapid.

She said, "I've never been with anyone who kisses me the way you do."

"I've never kissed another woman the way I kiss you," I said, which was partly true since I had never met a woman like her.

"I guess I just don't get the appeal. I mean, I've played with toys and stuff, but, you know, not actually attached to someone else's body."

"Janine, think about what it would be like to have me kiss you like that and make you feel that way and have me inside you at the same time."

"Maggie," she said, and placed her hand on my crotch, "but *you* wouldn't be inside me."

"I would be...in spirit. I would be...in a way."

She thought for a few minutes. "This means more to you than something sexual, doesn't it?"

"Yes. Some women use them all the time, as a preferred sexual method. Some even wear them on a day to day basis, like a pair of socks." She didn't seem surprised. She wasn't so naive as to not know about the bull dykes who were "packing" in the crowded bars on the lower east side.

"I've only ever had sex that way with women I..." I stopped myself short on the word "loved." Instead I said, "...have been involved with somewhat seriously." My extended pause did not go unnoticed. I imagined she took a mental inventory of my long list of exes, trying to guess who had qualified. In truth, there had only been three. I assumed she figured a higher number, and for some reason that made me feel bad.

She was still sitting on my lap with a hand on my shoulder.

"I don't know baby, it's sort of weird to me." She turned to meet my eyes and asked, "Would you want me to do it to you that way?"

I hadn't thought that far ahead.

“Well, you know, sure...if you wanted to.” With the weight of her on my lap and her other hand on my inner thigh, I was flushed and my loins were hot just thinking about it.

“Well, do you think I could take something the first time? Like a Valium or something? I may need to work my way up to this.”

The fact she’d said “first time” implied there would be a second time, and that elated me so much it was all I could do to refrain from giggling like a little girl.

“Sure. Listen, I’m just going to ask you to think about it. Don’t do anything on my behalf, it’s a big step.” As soon as the words came off my tongue I heard how idiotic it sounded, ‘a big step.’ There were no 12-step programs for strap-on virgins I was aware of. I decided to be honest.

“Listen to me. I may never have the courage to say this again, so I’m only going to say it once. This way of having sex I consider extremely intimate, it’s only with trepidation I brought it up in the first place. Sometimes I feel so overcome with desire for you I want to crawl inside your skin just to be as close to you as I can get. This is the only way I know how to get closer, to experience a moment with you we can’t get any other way. You don’t know because you haven’t...it’s just different.”

How transparent I must have been to describe the conflicting interests of love in the language of sex. While I was pleading my case for the most intimate kind of lesbian fucking, I couldn’t even tell the truth about my own intimate feelings. I didn’t know what else I could say, and felt I’d said too much already.

“I just wanted...” All desire was vanquished; all I felt was the sadness that accompanies realizing the heart will always win. I didn’t want to love Janine Jordan, but I did. My heart broke for her in the moment, with her hand in my lap, at her dining room table, on an October late afternoon.

“I know what you want,” she whispered, embracing me with the tenderness of a mother reassuring her child. I closed my eyes and imagined we had been together many years, at a different dining table in a modest bungalow somewhere in the

Florida Keys, the billboard charts and tours and concerts and fans long behind us.

She drew away from me, put her fist under my chin, and said, "Did you bring it with you? You did! Can I see it?"

How could I *not* love her? She was always such a good sport about everything.

When the dishes were done, we sat in the middle of her bed examining my little bag of tricks. Casually holding a dildo in one hand and a harness in the other she said, "One thing I never understood, what do you get out of it?"

I pointed to the base of the apparatus where there was a small latex ball for clit stimulation. I didn't need it. I could come just fantasizing about the things I wanted to do to her.

"Oh. You know, this feels so *real*," she said, amazed.

"It's supposed to."

I took my toys from her and pushed them onto the floor. "It doesn't have to be today, you know. I'm not going anywhere." I put my head on her lap and reached up to caress her face. She kissed me upside down, and her hair fell all around my face.

"How about now?"

I giggled. "Can we wait until its dark?"

"Why? Is it somehow better then?" she asked, completely serious.

"No!" I was in a full on giggling fit. Early social conditioning makes us snicker when someone says "penis" or otherwise named genitalia, even as adults. Strap-on sex conditioning, if such a thing exists, makes lesbians lighthearted about their approach to the whole business.

"I feel silly at first walking around with it just hanging there. I don't know how guys get through their day. Please, let's do it later when it's dark. With the lights out. And the door closed."

We both broke into hysterics.

We smoked a small bowl of pot to calm our nervousness and watched TV for a while. On one of my trips to the bathroom, I did the deed, and strapped on my latex manhood and put my sweatpants back on. I liked to start out clothed, it just seemed more appropriate for some reason. No other sexual experience

is precluded by more awkwardness, no matter how many times you've done it.

Janine took one look at my sheepish grin and knew, and another fit of giggling ensued. I went and sat behind her on the couch and tried to focus on the TV. There was a Hitchcock marathon on, and before I got to see the famous *Psycho* shower scene for the 100th something time, I heard the distinct change in Janine's breathing pattern as she caressed my inner thigh and I kissed the back of her neck. She stood up and took my hand, nearly dragging me back to the bedroom.

I closed the door slowly, leaving a candle on the headboard the only light in the room. There was a giant mansion behind Janine's brownstone that eclipsed the city lights almost entirely.

I wanted so much to please her I was ready to burst out of my skin. I stood and watched her undress and decided to leave my sweats on for a little while longer. She remained standing, waiting to see how she should position herself for me, an overwhelmingly considerate gesture, I thought. I sat upright, leaning against the headboard with my legs out in front of me. She mounted me and we began a slow, rhythmic rocking. Sometimes, being with a woman who'd been with men had its advantages.

We clung to each other and I knew already whatever reservations she might have had dissolved. She breathed hotly into my ear and whispered, "It's already different. I haven't felt like this since our first time together."

I hadn't either. I wanted to be more aggressive, but I didn't want to frighten her. "Do you trust me?"

She nodded. I leaned forward and gently pushed her back onto the bed. Freeing myself from beneath her, I swung my legs over the side and kicked off the sweatpants.

She lay there with her eyes closed, breathing heavily, spread before me like a Thanksgiving feast. I knelt beside her for a few moments in silent worship. I couldn't recall the last time I had actually gotten something I'd wanted so desperately. It is one of the most erotic memories I have; her face in the

candlelight, the sound of a saxophone down the street, a second before an experience that can only happen once.

I fell on top of her and used my hips as she guided me into her. I had planned on going slowly, but we were both beyond that. As I entered her, we both held our breath. I kissed her as I had in the dining room and felt her nails digging into my shoulder blades. For perhaps the first time in my life, I wished I were a man and could love her the way she wanted to be loved. When we came together in our harmonious opera of moans and sighs, I wished only she would take me, as a woman, and let me love her the only way I knew how.

Chapter 5

I woke up and had no idea where I was. My very first thought was, *I'm an alcoholic*. I'd known for years, of course, but I had never blacked out before. Sure, I'd have patches of foggy memories about any one evening, but not like this. I couldn't remember anything at all, and that scared me.

There was a soft knock at the door. As I looked around at the décor of the spare bedroom I was in, I realized I was at Dean's house. Dean was the drummer for the Blue Is, I'd become friendly with all of the band members and their wives and girlfriends, I'd been seeing Janine now for about nine months. Dean was married to Sheila, Bobby (lead guitar) was with Angela, and they'd been together five years. It took a while for them all to get used to me, to see me as something more than Janine's flavor of the week. She kept inviting me to events and parties, and I guess at some point I'd been recognized often enough that they knew she was serious about me. Or she'd told them. Or both.

"Hello?" Dean's wife called softly outside the door.

"I'm awake."

She entered and offered a steaming cup of black coffee.

"How are you feeling?"

"Awful. But this isn't exactly a new feeling. I'm an—I drink a lot on occasion. Guess I got carried away. I'll tell ya' Sheila, I don't remember anything. Anything at all, that's never happened to me before. Ever."

She sat down on the bed next to me. "Maggie, we all like you, Dean, the rest of the guys, Janine obviously cares for you a great deal. But you were...let's just say you weren't yourself last night. At least I've never seen you like that, and, as far as I could tell, Janine hasn't either."

This was terrible. I was so in love, so happy, why did I drink so much last night?

"Do you want to tell me? I really can't remember Sheil. Was I an asshole?"

"No, not an asshole. You were sad, very depressed. You

kept telling Janine to leave you now because you knew in your heart she would eventually anyway. You were pretty theatrical about it.”

“Where is she?”

“I don’t know. She made sure we put you to bed and she left.”

“I’m so sorry, Sheila. I must have made quite an ass of myself. I know you barely know me, but I’m not like that. And I love Janine, I’m sure you can see it.”

“I understand. We all go a little crazy sometimes. You just drank too much, that’s all.”

But that wasn’t all. Janine and I had both been drinking and using drugs more frequently the longer we were together. Usually, we had fun. We did coke and went out dancing, or we smoked weed and went to a movie. I had no idea what she did while she was on the road, or even at rehearsal, but I could guess. And she probably guessed as much about my drinking when she was away from me, if she even thought about it at all. We had never spoken about it. But this...this was problematic. Worst of all, I don’t remember Janine being drunk last night at all. Only me.

“She’ll get over it,” Sheila said. “It was very late. We were all a little drunk. By the time you had your meltdown it was just me and Dean, you guys, and Bobby and Angela.”

That was a little better. Earlier in the evening, Dean and Sheila’s house had been packed with people. I remembered why we were there; it was Dean’s 40th birthday.

“I need to call her. Can I use your phone?”

Sheila retreated into the house and came back with a cordless and towels. “You can take a shower here if you want to.”

“Thanks.”

She closed the door and I dialed Janine. It rang ten times before I gave up. She had an aversion to the answering machine, believing, “if it’s important, they’ll call back.” I doubted her band mates or her producers liked that very much.

After I showered, I sat down in the kitchen with Sheila and she made me waffles and told me all about Dean, her take on

the band, and her thoughts on Janine.

“I’ll be honest with you Maggie, I think she’s a troubled soul. But she’s a good person. It was hard for her to come into the band against such resistance. Dean adores her, treats her like his own daughter. You know, Dean’s been doing this for a long time, he helped a lot of bands get started in this area, so he knows a lot about the business. I still remember the day he came home and said ‘I’m tired of watching other men do what I *really* want to do.’ Him and Bobby have known each other since high school, they were in a band together even then. They auditioned hundreds of musicians, right out there in our garage. It went on for three months before they handpicked the rest of the guys and formed The Blue Is.”

She reflected for a few moments while I drained another cup of coffee and sopped up the remaining syrup with bits of waffle. I didn’t know any of this. Janine did talk about Dean, and the adoration was mutual. But I hadn’t known about his long history with music.

“Maggie. This life we have, these partners we’ve chosen, it’s very hard. They are under such pressure and scrutiny all the time; it makes them moody and unpredictable. But when Dean’s home, and I hear him tapping out a new rhythm, see him with a pencil between his teeth to take notes on lyric ideas...I see his passion for the music. I see it’s not what he does, but who he is. In those moments, I remember why I married him.”

I had an admiration for Sheila just then, and I wanted to be her friend. Aside from Cindy, I’d almost forgotten what it was like to have friends. In the past several years, I’d become consumed with work, drinking, compulsive sex, and isolating myself. It was fun in the beginning to feed my disgruntled, misunderstood poet persona, but I had become very lonely. And I knew it wasn’t healthy for me or the relationship to spend time only with Janine.

“I’ve screwed up every relationship I’ve ever had, Sheil. Sometimes I knew I chose the wrong woman to begin with, but not always. I’m fine on my own, I always have been. But I’ve never wanted it to work so much before.”

"The most important thing is that you trust her. Do you? I mean, being on the road and playing all these gigs, I still worry about Dean. Drugs, women, or in your case men *and* women, all readily available. It helps that he calls, and we have been together many years. Janine has brought other people, mostly men but not always, into our home on a few occasions, or to parties. But I'll tell you, I haven't seen her with anyone the way she is with you. Just the way she looks at you is different. I thought from the time I met her until now that she was damaged, that she couldn't be in a committed relationship."

Funny that Sheila would say so, I thought that about myself until I met Janine.

"Thanks for talking to me, Sheila. And for taking care of me this morning. I'm glad I have someone close to this whole situation I can talk to. I do love her, in ways I can't even put into words. And, for someone like me, that's pretty scary. She calls me from the road too, and she sends me little care packages, or she'll call me and sing to me, sometimes she reads to me. Sometimes we write together and I try to help her find the right words. But prose and lyrics aren't the same thing, I never knew just how different they were. Still, we can sort of collaborate. She tells me I make her want to sing. I understand that, because she makes me want to write."

Sheila wiped away a tear.

"What is it?"

"You reminded me how much I love my husband, that's all."

So other people had this bond, I didn't know. But I didn't think Sheila and Dean loved each other while cutting their bags of cocaine in half. I didn't want to say out loud this was what I worried about more than anything, for both of us. Right at that moment it was mostly me worrying about me. I had to cut back. This blackout incident was most certainly not okay, even though Sheila was right, Janine would get over it.

"I'm really sorry about last night," I said, getting up to leave. "Where are my keys?"

Sheila grabbed them off a hook by the front door.

"You take care of yourself. And go make up with her, okay?"

I smiled and left.

* * * *

I heard from her later that day. She had indeed forgiven me, but she thought it was a good idea if we spent the night apart, in our own beds for a change. I agreed. I told her I had given some serious thought to my drinking and our combined drug use, and that I wanted to slow down. She said very little, which made me wonder how much she was using on the road.

She had just found out the band was going back to LA for a week, a gig every night at some of the bigger venues. The Blue Is second single, "Serenity Speeches" had peaked at number 6 and remained there for several weeks. I ended our conversation with "*You're going out a youngster, but you've got to come back a star!*"

She responded only with "*42nd Street*, really?"

While she was gone I strictly monitored my alcohol intake. She called me every night from LA before their scheduled show. Not drinking as much, I missed her more since I wasn't escaping my feelings. The third night she was gone I cried when she sang part of a new song to me on the phone, "*It's what you call lonely...that's ooh-kaay...it's what makes you...beautiful...*" I started saying "I love you" before I hung up. Sometimes she said it back, sometimes not. It didn't matter to me.

When she returned from her LA trip, I told her in person how much I loved her, how sorry I was for embarrassing her, and I promised it would never, ever happen again. She sent me flowers at work the next day, something she had not done in our nine months together. Weeks flew by and I realized we'd make it to a one-year anniversary, something I had not done since my relationship with Elizabeth. Janine started getting invited to different talk shows and magazines for interviews, which she would only agree to if the performances or write-ups included the whole band. Some didn't agree to that, but *Late Night with David Letterman* did. It seemed like things couldn't get any better.

The *Late Night* show was awesome; I was allowed to accompany her backstage. I'd never been on the live set of a studio before. It was total chaos, people running about everywhere perfecting last minute details. Just like in the movies, someone popped their head into the dressing room and said "five minutes, Miss Jordan." Except it wasn't just Miss Jordan, I was sitting in there with the whole band. None of them flinched though; they must have been used to it by then. I wondered if they knew how loyal she was to them, that she'd been approached several times to go out on her own and had said no. She had even said in interviews "I'm a member of The Blue Is, it's not Janine Jordan *and* the Blue Is."

Me, Sheila, and Angela, Bobby's girlfriend, pushed our chairs together in the green room to watch the show on the TV screen mounted on the wall. Sam, Josh, and Corey, the other three band members, were bachelors, and each of them had rows of groupies in lines around the corner waiting outside the studio. It felt special to me to be among the much smaller group of "significant others" huddled and hidden away backstage.

"To our loves!" Angela said, and handed each of us a glass of champagne. I hadn't gotten drunk in several weeks. Janine and I hadn't done any cocaine since my blackout. We still kept a stash of pot, but I only remembered doing one hitters one late night after she got back from a 12-hour rehearsal. I had decided my blackout and my frequency of getting high had been a result of my fear of losing Janine, and now that I felt secure in the relationship, I didn't need it.

We were having recreational fun, that was all. I'd become fond of telling Janine it was she who "intoxicated me" every time she offered me something. She'd just roll her eyes at me and then take a hit or have one more drink after I'd stopped. That was fine with me. It didn't affect me, it didn't affect her work, it didn't affect the relationship, so, as far as I was concerned, there wasn't a problem. Besides, I *liked* to drink, she *liked* to get high. It was a want, not a dependent need.

After the show was over, everyone went to a party, of course, at a hotel suite where one of the other Letterman guests was staying. We walked in, the whole rock band entourage, and someone took my coat and handed me a rum and coke. The "suite" was the whole top floor of the hotel more or less. So this was what success looked like. I moped around the party; I would rather be at home, alone, making love to Janine. Sheila found me in the kitchen. "This is how it is, sugar. It's good for her, it's good for the band. You're going to have to get used to this."

"I know."

"Come on. Mingle with me." She dragged me out into the crowd where strippers were handing out Jell-o shots. I looked around. Dean was talking to Dave Letterman. Bobby and Angela were sitting on a sofa, making out like teenagers. Sam was talking to a guy in a suit that looked to me like another record producer. And Corey and Josh were doing lines of cocaine with some of the other strippers in a corner, surrounded by their groupie girls. I had no idea who any of the other people were besides Letterman and I felt very out of place. I didn't see Janine anywhere.

I had a few more rum and cokes and tried to get comfortable in my surroundings. Sheila stayed by me and kept bringing me into conversations I didn't want to take part in.

"Sheil, I want to go home."

"It's part of what they have to do, Maggie. They have to make connections, be seen."

"I get that," I said. "I do, I'm not mad, I'm just not comfortable here, that's all."

"If you leave now, she will feel like you aren't supporting her."

Fine. I got up to go look for the bathroom. I wandered down a long hallway, and then I thought I heard Janine's voice behind one of the closed doors.

"Hello?" I pushed open the door to find Janine, sitting on a bed, topless, with a needle in her arm, firmly gripped by the hand of a man I'd never seen before.

"What..." My face got hot and I started to freak out, I didn't know what to do.

The man lit a joint and handed it to me. "Why don't you just relax? Sit down and watch."

I sat, she didn't move an inch in the few minutes that passed between me and Needle Man. I looked at her face and she was smiling ear to ear, humming.

The man said, "She's good. Real good," and then proceeded to shoot up himself.

It moved me to see her this way, she looked...happy. Normally, even when she was truly happy, there was still a look about her, a touch of sadness in her eyes, or the corner of her mouth, or the way she folded her hands in her lap. Something mysterious but ever present. I was pretty stoned myself, and imagined her high was different. I stared at her for what seemed like hours, then realized Needle Man had left the room and closed the door behind him.

I looked at the track mark left in her right arm and remembered all I had been told about heroin. I'd never seen it, been in the same room with it. Josh and Corey had told me some sordid stories of their early days in a garage band in the eighties when everyone was using it. But when their friends started dying, they quit. Sam told me he had used heroin with Janine once when she first joined the band, someone had given it to him, and he had no idea how to shoot. She did, apparently.

"Come here."

Janine's voice ripped me out of orbit and back to reality. The reality of drugs, of death, of dating a rock star, which I still sometimes couldn't believe was a reality. I was frightened by the look of her now, she didn't seem real to me. There was now a haunted look in her eyes, a desperate searching no man, woman, or drug could ever answer to.

"Come here baby," she said again, but I swear her lips didn't move. Afraid she was casting some sort of heroin witchcraft that affected me simply by being there, I imagined myself running for the door. Somehow she had aged in the minutes that had passed, she'd become an ancient muse with heroin knowledge that only she could dispel. Without really being aware of my own body, I moved to the bed. I kissed her, still with

the lingering feeling of not at all knowing who she was. She kissed me back but without passion, fumbled with the button fly on my jeans. Then she tilted her head back with an explosion of cackling, then slumped over a pillow.

“Leave me alone.”

I was awake now, sober in an instant. Reality will do that to you. I returned to the party, dazed. Sheila found me back in the kitchen, headlong into a bottle of scotch, glass optional.

“I’m so sorry, Maggie. Dean’s upset about this too. You need to talk to her about this in the morning. It’s no good, Maggie.”

* * * *

The next day I preached like a first-rate school marm, spouting all the information Dean and Sheila had shared with me about heroin. You’d have thought I was touring with the D.A.R.E. keynote speakers in high schools across America. I felt silly, hypocritical, and afraid. Silly because here I was, a year into fucking a rock star (everyone’s second best fantasy to actually *being* a rock star), and chancing ruining it all by telling her how to live. Thus the afraid part, certain she would toss me aside for some heroin-using, or at least, heroin-accepting groupie who was probably hanging out in the driveway right at that moment. I rationalized this away by telling myself that sometimes, it really does come true, that love prevails. Pamela Courson, after all, had done this for years with Jim Morrison’s hellacious drug and alcohol addiction. (To no avail, of course, but I wasn’t giving up.) And although he never gave it up, he never cut her out of his life either. It was a tattered thread to hang my tirade on, but I did.

My hypocrisy, which I knew Janine would attempt to trip me up with, was about my own pot, coke, and alcohol abuse. I had been on my best behavior since that blackout at Dean and Sheila’s, and I was thoroughly convinced I could take it or leave it. I mostly decided on “take” only because it was readily available now I was in this rock and roll lifestyle, if it weren’t for that, I honestly believed I wouldn’t go searching it out on my own.

Except alcohol, of course, that had been a part of my life for years before I met Janine, and I knew it was what she would call me on. An addict hassling another addict was my hypocritical flaw. But again my Pamela Courson analogy would save me. I could, and would, quit for Janine if she asked me to. I also reminded her she didn't know me before, I had come a long way from the raging, wall-punching, suicidal drunk I had been ten years ago.

When my fire and brimstone speech was over, I took her hands in mine and cooed soft words she might have heard a thousand times before. I would help her, I would take care of her, blah, blah, blah, it all sounded so rehearsed and hollow. I wanted to speak from the heart, to address her as someone I truly cared about, my girlfriend, not some star struck fantasy come true.

But she was just that, and I was so consumed by the very idea of her that my talent for forming the right words escaped me. I hated my own vision of myself, chiding her like a mother in a grocery store who discovered her son had chomped on a candy bar that wasn't paid for yet. None of my intelligence, education, and poetic take on life could walk me through a lecture on heroin.

Janine surprised me, though. I stopped mid-sentence when I saw a tiny, perfect, single tear run down her cheek. I realized she hadn't said a word, only sat idly by and taken in everything I'd so poorly illustrated.

She ran her fingers through my hair and said, "I'm sorry, baby. No one ever cared this much before. I won't do it anymore. Will you please stay with me here tonight? I'm supposed to go meet that guy from last night, (*fucking Needle Man*, I thought silently), but I won't go if you're here."

We stayed in the brownstone all day and talked. The phone rang nearly every hour and was ignored. As it turned out, Needle Man had a name, Tom Shiffrin. He was part of the New York elite, a big brass in production who had turned Janine onto "juice" (that's what she called it) about three years prior to her induction into the Blue Is.

They'd met at a party down in Tampa, Florida when

Janine was playing solo in jazz clubs. He'd been instrumental in introducing her to the then manager of the Blue Is. He only surfaced once in a while at parties like the one we had been at last night, but juice was easy enough to find on the street, so, apparently, Shiffrin was not my only hurdle to jump.

Janine told me she'd been using heroin on and off for about five years, sometimes in astronomical amounts over a few days, sometimes an occasional fix every three or four months. The more popular the Blue Is became, the less she used because she wanted to be responsible to the band, to the music.

She said, "I don't want to be the lead singer you never know is going to show up or not."

She said she didn't think she was hooked, but it was growing in availability with each success the band had and that scared her.

That day would live in my memory for some time. It felt like the very last wall between us had been breached with us each discussing our addictions openly. I felt closer to her than ever, and we vowed, again, to slow down. Heroin and cocaine would no longer be welcomed by either of us. We recommitted to focusing on our own individual careers, and thought it was a good idea to spend more time with Dean and Sheila, Bobby and Angela, and Cindy, since these were the people in our lives who seemed to be the most responsible. As a final commitment, we decided that night to move in together.

Chapter 6

On our one-year anniversary, instead of a nice dinner by candlelight, we stood in the middle of our new empty living room in Astoria and waited for the movers to arrive.

Unloading the rental in the village had been easy as it was prime real estate. And I was quite sure once the realtor herself got it back in her docket, she would go after what her original rental price was instead of the discount I'd gotten for one night of relentless marathon sex.

Janine's pricey townhouse in Brooklyn Heights hadn't been as easy to move. It was listed for almost two months with no bidders. Then, completely unanticipated, Sam inherited a small fortune from a rich uncle he didn't even know he had. A bachelor all his life, he thought his sister's kid could benefit most from his estate, even though they had been estranged for more than twenty years. Sam went with his mother to the reading of the will in upstate Connecticut for emotional support, and he came home a few hundred thousand dollars richer. So he decided to take the townhouse and he shelled out the cash to turn one of the bedrooms into a small rehearsal studio for the band. I remarked on how generous I thought that had been, and Janine said, "Are you kidding? Sam's a great musician and he will drop out of the Blue Is and start his own band the moment he sees the chance."

Janine had found our new home, the real estate agent had wanted to show her places in all five boroughs, but she took the first place she'd been shown. In her mind, it was Astoria or nowhere. She'd been fascinated with Greece ever since she'd seen *Summer Lovers* when she was fifteen. Like Daryl Hannah's character, Cathy, Janine used to dream she was a mermaid. Astoria was known for its Greek heritage almost as famously as Little Italy's was in the city. Like most neighborhoods once known for its immigrant status, at some point it became a trendy place to live, or at least to hang out. The locals stayed strong and petitioned their city government relentlessly, and often, when hard hitters came into to try and buy out mom and pop stores to

put in Starbucks and Jamba Juice. So Astoria hadn't completely come into its own just yet, so, although on the rise, it was still affordable and interesting. Plus it housed The Museum of the Moving Image, a must see for any film buff, and thereby giving both of us endless hours of "date time" whenever we felt like watching a classic on the big screen.

I had convinced Janine to settle for a mortgage I could contribute to, even though not quite at 50%. We also agreed to put the house in both of our names, so if anything ever went wrong with our relationship, we would both have to be responsible for flipping it. She wasn't used to making responsible decisions by herself—the producers made decisions about the music, Dean made decisions about the band, and so on. I had never purchased a house before, so we both learned through the experience. Secretly, I also wanted some assurance that we'd both have somewhere to live if the Blue Is were a short lived success, new bands were being signed every day, the grunge movement had taken over every major city, and the future of rock blues was anyone's guess.

Our house was on a cul-de-sac in a quiet neighborhood. The house had been designed based on the popular California "sprawling" style, a raised ranch with high beamed ceilings and floor to ceiling windows in the living room. Three bedrooms, two spacious full bathrooms, and a full basement. All in all, we had gotten a very good deal. The real estate agent from Century was, of course, a big fan.

As we stood unpacking boxes in the kitchen, Janine took a glass out of my hand and wrapped her arms around my waist. "Do you remember when we first met?"

"They wore gray, you wore blue."

"My darling, I mean in our real life, not *Casablanca*."

"Of course I remember. It was love at first sight."

"Yeah, right. Bet you didn't think we'd be standing here a year later, did you?"

"Did you?"

"Yes. I never told you this, but I knew you were 'the one'."

"It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in

possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife.”

“*Pride and Prejudice*, right? I didn’t know that’s what I wanted. I knew I wanted something, but I didn’t know it was a someone. Do you love me, Maggie?”

“You know I do. Where is all this coming from?”

“I’m afraid I’ll blow it, living together.”

“Probably should’ve thought of that before we signed off on the paperwork.”

“I’m being serious.”

“I know, sweetheart. I’m sorry. I do love you. We have our differences, but we are a good team, right? And you like my cooking. That’s half the battle isn’t it?”

“I don’t think we’ve had our battles yet.”

“Is it so hard for you to believe that you, that we, could actually be happy?”

“I don’t like all the uncertainty.”

“What happened to the girl who asked me what if today is all we have? That day on the beach?”

“She got afraid, I guess. You know, Sheryl Crow is going to take over the world, where will The Blue Is be then?”

“Opening for her at Madison Square Garden.” I kissed her and went back to unpacking glasses and dishes.

* * * *

Moving in together had to have an adjustment period, we were both so used to living alone. It helped that I had a regular schedule, and Janine rarely had a schedule at all aside from rehearsals. That meant there was no fighting for shower time in the morning, and she was free to go to bed with me at night if she wished, or stay up, or stay out. I was grateful to get to see her, to touch her, every single day. The next major tour wouldn’t be until after the new album was released, and that was still quite a while away. There were no more foreseeable trips to LA now all the Wolf Creek contracts were in place, and most of the Blue Is gigs were limited to the tri-state area. We went out with friends and had dinner at Dean and Sheila’s and I hung out with

Cindy more than I had in several years. Janine and Cindy had even gotten together a few times without me. We made the transition smoothly, and once again it all felt oddly normal.

For Janine, home life was a welcome relief from the road and the studio, she was home much more often than I had expected her to be, and seemed happy about it. Her biggest transition was getting used to waking up with Sebastian sleeping on her head, or curled up behind her butt when she slept on her side. She told me her parents were both allergic to most fur, so she'd never had a pet growing up. I rectified that by getting her the sweetest, cutest cocker spaniel for her 31st birthday. She promptly named him Joplin.

When we'd been living in the house for nearly four months we threw a house warming party, it had taken that long for The Blue Is to have an entire weekend free. We both invited our parents, a few of our new neighbors we'd gotten friendly with, Dean and Sheila, Bobby and Angela, Cindy, Sam, Josh, and Corey. Josh and Corey, I knew, probably wouldn't make an appearance, but I believed they'd think it was nice to be invited. Our friends would show up later in the afternoon, but our parents we would have all to ourselves from late morning until a couple hours after lunch.

I got up early to clean and make pastries, I had a great Hungarian recipe for *kiflis* from my parents friends, the Dekovics. While I was drinking coffee and cutting the pastry into triangles, Janine sauntered into the kitchen with that sheepish guilty look she had, which I adored.

"Don't be mad."

"About what?"

She pulled a small baggie out of her pocket. "I copped this from Corey. I thought we'd both be nervous about our parents coming."

"What is it?"

"Just a little low-grade crank, nothing too spectacular. He said it was a 'little bright happiness with a touch of speed up'."

"I'm not mad. But let's only do a little. I don't know about your parents, but mine would be pretty outraged."

"Mine would too. Don't worry, a little is all I got. For fun. Nothing more."

The drug was fun, and, as promised, not over the top. I felt very alive, alert, and found myself funnier than usual. It was more of a body buzz than anything, so I was certain our parents would be none the wiser. But I feared using without negative consequence would lull Janine into a sense of security about using other things, and that was not okay.

We made Bloody Marys and waited for our parents to arrive.

"Baby?"

"I know what you're going to say."

"You do?"

"You're going to say that using speed today is a one-time deal and it doesn't give me permission to go out and use heroin again."

"How did you know that?"

"Baby, I know *you*. Don't worry. But, since you mentioned it, it goes both ways, right? Can you keep taking it easy on the scotch?"

"These are so good I don't think I'll be drinking anything else today. I'll count."

"I'm glad, you know. That we are both better than we were."

"Me too."

Janine didn't know I drank myself to sleep most of the nights she wasn't there. I found it so difficult to sleep without her, for me it was the only way. She didn't know about my five to six martini lunches with my co-workers either. I felt like my drinking was under control, and I had never blacked out again, so I saw no reason to discuss it. I could go several days in a row without any alcohol at all, and I convinced myself that meant I was simply a "heavy drinker" and not an alcoholic. I had more or less told Janine so several weeks ago. There had been no more "incidents" and I think she only felt compelled to mention the scotch once in a while as a way of making sure we were still on the same page.

I thought we were; my page was no blackouts, no moronic or dramatic behavior, no problem. Besides, I doubted her

sincerity when she was away. We trusted each other in most things, but had an unspoken mistrust about this thing in particular. I knew it, and I knew she knew it. But we loved each other, and that mattered more.

Our parents fell in love with each other almost immediately with no pressure from us. I had met hers on several occasions, and she had also met mine, but they had never been introduced to each other. I knew Janine's parents still did not like the idea of a lesbian relationship, and I hoped the accepting nature of my own parents might sway them just a little.

Her parents had, however, been kind and respectful toward me, and I was sure they even liked me, even if they didn't like what I was. I had taken my father to see The Blue Is one night at the Stone Pony down the shore, and he, I believed, developed a bit of a crush on Janine that very night. When my parents arrived at our front door that afternoon, he was wearing a Blue Is T-shirt, and I adored him for that.

When we went to gather everyone to sit down for lunch, I realized my mother had not shut up since she starting talking to Janine's mom, Gayle. *My* mother, who usually you needed to coax even in idle chit-chat. Her dad, Wayne, and my dad were standing on the front porch smoking cigars (which my father rarely did) and I listened to them talk about the band and other music. They had been raised on Gene Pitney and Tijuana Brass and that apparently instilled a love for music in both of them.

When I was younger, I always thought the reason everyone's dad owned the Tijuana Brass album was because of that picture with the girl covered in whipped cream on the front jacket. I came to understand years later it did have musical merit, the whipped cream girl was just a bonus. Neither dad understood the appeal of Nirvana or Kurt Cobain. They also weren't fond of the sudden appearance of boy bands like All-4-One and Boys II Men, to them, if you weren't going to be The Beatles then why bother? They both loved Janine's cover of "Angel from Montgomery," because, after all, John Prine was the best.

Wayne was a retired history professor, he had taught at Columbia for many years. My dad, Hal, was a huge history buff,

so they had that to talk about as well. When they stepped back inside, he tousled Janine's hair then patted her on the head and quoted *Dracula*, "*Listen to them, children of the night, what music they make.*"

She looked at me, a little jarred to have my dad playing the game with her instead of me, but her look turned to one of admiration and she turned back to my dad and said, "I'm really, really glad you're here Mr. O'Leary."

Somewhere during lunch I realized the drug had worn off. I fought the desire to call Corey myself and ask him to bring more, reminding myself I was "trying to be good." The early afternoon passed languidly, it was a beautiful late September and I loved the way the sunlight fractured through our linden trees.

I gathered more instant photo memories to file away the day at various points: My father handing Wayne a Killian's Irish Red and clapping him on the shoulder like they were old friends; my mother talking to Janine about the city and all its splendor while both leaned back in lawn chairs and my lover absentmindedly petted Joplin under her chair, Gayle stopping me with a tray of iced tea in my hands in the hallway and gently saying, "You two have made a very nice home," our friends, *real* friends, pulling up in various vehicles in front of our very own house. I started thinking, if I could see these things and appreciate them sober (well, mostly, there were those Bloody Marys), then maybe I could actually *be* sober.

* * * *

It was four AM when Cindy shook me awake. Any dreams of sobriety I might have had earlier in the day had vanished somewhere in the evening between the shot for shot game Janine and I were playing with the neighbors and then frantically looking for Joplin when he escaped into the yard across the street. I vaguely remembered passing out on the couch, Cindy, Angela, and Bobby were the only ones left standing, everyone else had gone home. I convinced all of them to stay since I

thought none of them should drive. Angela and Bobby had fallen asleep on the floor, Janine was in the love seat, and Cindy and I were on the couch, we were all watching *The Producers* and laughing. I was very drunk, but giddy and fun, and I remembered thinking: *these guys almost never do this, they will be hung over tomorrow and won't drink like this again for a very long time. I want to be like that.*

"Is she singing?" I asked Cindy. I could hear Janine in the bathroom, and could have sworn she was wailing out a rendition of The Doors' *Five to One*. The Blue Is had done an amazing cover of it a few weeks ago at the Passaic Theater in Jersey. She had changed the words from "you" to "I" when she sang,

*"I walk across the floor with a flower in my hair,
trying to tell you no one understands,
trade in my hours for a handful of dimes,
gonna make it baby in our prime..."*

and strutted out into the audience while she sang. It was hot.

"Jesus, you're still drunk. NO, you idiot, get up! Something's wrong."

I realized Janine was not singing, she was crying out in pain. I ran down the hallway to the bathroom. When I burst into the room, Janine was lying in the fetal position on the floor, a small pool of blood collecting beneath her.

"Cin! Call an ambulance!"

I sunk down on the floor next to her and cradled her head in my arms. "It's okay, baby, I'm right here. You'll be fine, everything is going to be fine."

Internally I doubted; I had no idea why she was bleeding, or even where she was bleeding from. I looked her over, first I thought she'd made a suicide attempt, but there were no cuts anywhere I could see. Then I thought maybe she was in the bathroom using, and did something wrong with a needle, but there was no evidence of that either. Then I saw, she was bleeding from between her legs.

"I don't know, I don't...I'm...I'm so sorry Maggie...I'm so sorry..." she was whimpering.

"Shh...don't talk baby. The ambulance is on its way." I started to cry. What was wrong with her? Was she sick? Dying? I didn't know what I would do if I lost her and, in spite of our lifestyle, it had never even entered my mind as a possibility before. I looked down at her red face, hair all sweaty and disheveled, and still thought she was so beautiful. My sweet Janine, the love of my life, I couldn't lose her, I just couldn't.

"Where the HELL IS THAT AMBULANCE?!"

* * * *

I was standing outside the ER doors smoking when Dean and Sheila arrived. Sheila came to me and put her arms around me and I broke down sobbing. Dean went on inside and Sheila held me saying, "It's going to be okay, Maggie. Whatever it is, it's going to be okay."

After a few hours in the waiting room with no news from anyone, a doctor finally approached us. "Who is her family?"

We just looked at each other. Dean got up, ushered the doctor aside, and had a quiet conversation a few feet down the hall. The doctor turned to me and said, "Miss O'Leary, will you come with me please?"

He said nothing until we reached an office. He waved me to a chair and closed the door behind us.

"Did you know she was pregnant?"

My heart sank.

"No."

"Did she know she was pregnant?"

"I don't know. I mean...I don't know. If she did, she didn't tell me."

"I'm sorry, Miss O'Leary. Listen, I'm talking to you because Dean explained to me who you are. And I know who she is. Look...I'm a doctor, I'm not here to talk to you about your relationship with Janine. I'm here to give you the facts because you are considered her primary caregiver since you live together.

Janine was pregnant. If I had to guess, I would say she didn't know either. This isn't a miscarriage, really, it's what we call a chemical pregnancy, which means it was less than five weeks into gestation, that means no gestational sac had fully developed yet...it means her body won't pass anything else... do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Janine is going to be fine. Some women have these and never even know they were pregnant. In Janine's case, her body behaved as if the pregnancy were further along, we're not sure why, there are any number of reasons, the most likely cause is an elevated level of estrogen, which she should be tested for, she might have some sort of hormonal imbalance. In any event, we were able to stop the bleeding and give her pain medication for the cramping. You will be able to take her home tonight. Just make sure she gets plenty of rest the next day or two, and she'll be as good as new."

"Okay. Thank you, doctor. Can I see her now?"

"Yes."

He left me alone in the room. I did not know how to feel. I was, of course, relieved Janine was okay, not sick, not dying. But she'd gotten pregnant. And, unless I had performed a biological miracle, it meant she had cheated on me. We had never actually stated that we were monogamous with one another, and, in the beginning, I hadn't been either. But after we'd been together for about three months, I had no desire to be with anyone else, and I didn't think she did either. The fact that she cheated on me with a man was, of course, much worse. Maybe since it was a man, she didn't consider it cheating. I was very confused. I always assumed "real love" implied exclusivity, and I thought that's what we had. Had I been wrong to never actually declare it out loud? I wondered which gig it had happened at, and if anyone else knew about it, if on top of being betrayed I had also been humiliated in front of the rest of the band. Did Dean know? Would he have told me if he did?

I ran down the hall to the ladies room and vomited. I washed off my face with cool water, sank down on the floor, and

started bawling. Sheila came in and found me.

“Oh, Maggie. Are you alright? She’s asking for you.”

“I don’t know what to do, Sheil.”

“Well, she needs you right now. You can fight about it tomorrow.”

“How could she do this to me?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure she didn’t do it to hurt you. She made a mistake.”

“That’s a pretty big fucking mistake,” I sobbed, sniffing.

“I know.”

She came over to me, helped me up off the floor, and wiped off my nose with a paper towel. “Come on.”

She walked me down the hall back past the waiting room to the ER bed where Janine was and everyone else was crowded around her. When I walked in the room went silent. Cindy spoke up and said, “Come on everyone. It’s been a long night. I’ll take everybody home.”

One by one they filed out of the room. Dean kissed Janine on the forehead and squeezed my hand on the way out.

She looked at me and tears welled up in her eyes. My heart was breaking, I loved her so much in that moment. I knew I would forgive her and that made me feel weak and foolish. I went and sat down on the edge of the bed and took her hand in mine. Soon we were both crying, and neither of us said anything, we were just there looking at each other with tears running down our faces. A nurse came in with a clipboard. “I’m sorry. I’ll need you both to sign these discharge papers, then Miss Jordan is free to go.”

* * * *

That night I slept on the couch with Sebastian and Joplin. I tried to go to bed with her but I couldn’t sleep. Every time I rolled over I knew I woke her up, and every time I even glanced at her I got angry. That combined with knowing she’d been through a trauma and I knew she needed her rest. I could be considerate, even when I was mad.

Around 11 AM on Sunday morning, I heard her shuffling down the hallway toward the living room. I got up and went into the kitchen because I didn't want her to come sit by me and start crying again, it would dissolve my anger and what I had to say along with it.

I stood at the kitchen island and drank my coffee while she slid into the breakfast nook. We had argued about the damn nook for a week, we couldn't agree on the tone of the wood. Janine won and we got the pine. She always won. *God*, I hated myself.

I poured her a glass of apple juice, I knew that's what she would want, it's what she always wanted when she was hung over, so I assumed her body was feeling very much the same as it would under those circumstances.

"Thank you."

I sat down across from her and said nothing.

"I don't know how I got pregnant."

"Really? What are you, five?"

"I didn't mean it that way. I meant...I thought he wore a condom."

I glared at her.

"Maggie...I don't even know what to say. I know 'I'm sorry' doesn't do the trick. I know you're angry, and you should be. I have no excuse."

I glared at her some more.

"I assume next you're going to tell me it didn't mean anything."

"It didn't."

"Of course it didn't. Does anything?"

"Of course. I love you. I made a mistake. I was...loaded. And I was lonely."

"Lonely?"

"Yes, lonely."

"Usually, when people get lonely and they are in a relationship, they call their partner to feel better, not go fuck some guy."

"I'm sorry Maggie."

"You were right; sorry isn't going to cut it."

"Well what is?"

"I don't know. I just...can you at least tell me what happened? When it happened? According to the doctor, it could not have been that long ago."

"It was the show at Roseland. You were away for those couple of days, at that book expo down in Atlantic City."

"I was away. So now this is my fault?"

"I didn't say that."

Glare, glare, glare.

"The show at Roseland had some problems. Me and the guys weren't getting along, we argued about the set list right up until we went on stage. There was a lot of fighting in the audience, a rowdy crowd. It was one of those shows where I felt like I was singing out all my emotions and no one was listening."

Oh, the poor, misunderstood artist, I thought to myself.

"I was a wreck, and I drank a lot during the show, there were these girls in the front that kept handing me shots. After the show I was backstage and this guy, a stagehand, walked right up to me and said, 'They didn't appreciate you, are you alright? It looked to me like you were having a hard time, like you could use a hug maybe.' He was so sweet, and I was so..."

"Horny?"

"No! It wasn't like that, Maggie. I didn't plan on it happening, it just did."

"At the club?"

"No."

"You *went home* with him?"

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ. Did you even *think* about me?"

"Of course I did. There were a couple of times I almost told you, but the more days passed, the harder it got, and then I felt so guilty, and you've been so content lately, I didn't want to ruin everything."

"So you were just never going to tell me?"

"I don't know. I mean, it doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Have there been others?"

"No. I was still having sex with other people when we first started dating, I know you were too. But after a while, maybe not even quite a month, I stopped seeing anyone else."

I decided not to tell her I kept fucking other women for about three months, not one. I was having sex compulsively because I was so afraid of falling in love with Janine. They meant nothing, so I wanted to believe this guy meant nothing to her too. I softened a little.

"You really hurt me."

"I know."

"Did you miss men?"

"No. It wasn't about that at all. I promise."

I softened some more. "Are you feeling okay? Do you need to rest more?"

"I feel fine. Tired, but fine. The cramps have stopped and there hasn't been anymore bleeding. The doctor said there might be, but there isn't."

I sighed. I wanted to be angry enough to leave her, or at least to threaten to leave her. Deep within, my heart could not deny it would forgive her even if the mind didn't want to follow. Things, a lot of things actually, would be different if I didn't believe she loved me. In my own history there had been a fair share of cheating on both sides, so it wasn't as if I didn't understand why she had done it. And I knew the remorse, the shame, the self-loathing that came afterward. *Dammit*. I got up and went over to her side of the nook and pulled her up into my arms. She cried on my shoulder and I did my best Otis Redding, "*I've...been...loving you...too long...I don't wanna stop now...*" We danced into the living room and she went and pulled the Greatest Hits CD off the shelf and popped it into the stereo. He sang it much better than I did. She dragged me onto the couch and made love to me slowly, passionately, apologetically. We fell asleep intertwined among the cushions, I heard a soft rain on the windowpanes and the rooftop, and slowly drifted into peace once again.

Chapter 7

Someone was shouting from very far away, at least it sounded far away, fuzzy. And there was another noise, some sort of wolf howling, where the fuck was I?

“Do you hear me?! You fucking asshole! You almost killed my dog!”

I blinked and I was on my front lawn and Janine was yelling at me at the top of her lungs.

“Wait, what?” was all I could say. I had heard about this. Coming to in the midst of a blackout. It had never happened to me before, and I thought it was funny.

“What, what about the dog?” I started giggling.

“What the fuck is *wrong* with you?!”

I was still laughing. “Um, I’m sorry baby. You’re going to have to forgive me, it seems I’ve just arrived,” I slurred.

I was so busy entertaining myself I didn’t realize she had walked away from me. There was a commotion and I turned to see her with the neighbor’s twenty-something son. I realized in a horrible instant what must have happened.

The son, Jack I think his name was, was frantically talking into his cell phone and shouting out instructions to Janine.

“Go get something hard, flat, like a broken down cardboard box or something!”

I followed her into the garage, “Here, over here.”

We pulled out some sturdy boxes and she chose one and went back outside. I watched as Janine and Jack slid the cardboard box under Joplin and then lifted him into the flatbed of Jack’s truck. In a moment he was peeling away and I stood there until the tail lights faded in the distance.

I looked around at the scene. My Toyota Corolla was in the grass. Broken bits of plastic from the turn signal housing were on the ground. The mailbox was tilted and it looked like I had sideswiped it. There was a small patch of bloodied grass where Joplin had been. The door to the car was hanging open, with the “bing, bing, bing” noise telling you so. On the passenger’s seat there was a brown bottle bag and a case of

Dos Equis. I couldn't remember anything.

I was grateful none of the other neighbors were outside, although for all I knew they all were earlier. But it seemed quiet, if I was lucky no one else was home on the cul-de-sac, and it appeared that way from the amount of empty driveways and darkened windows, thank God. And I vaguely remembered that Jack's parents, Darrin and Lisa, were out of town. Lisa had come over to ask us to keep an eye on the place, make sure Jack wasn't throwing some wild party in their absence. Apparently, the party had been at *my* house, and I was the only guest.

I moved the car off the grass and into the driveway. I opened a Dos Equis and sat on the front porch, wondering what to do. Pulling my cell phone out of my pocket, I started to cry before Cindy even answered.

"What's wrong?"

"I killed the dog."

"You killed the dog?"

"Well, maybe not, I mean I could have killed the dog, I almost killed the dog, Jesus Christ, I don't know. I need help, Cindy. Like real help. I need to quit drinking, can you, will you come over please?"

I was sobbing now and wasn't sure if Cin understood a word I was saying. "Hello?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Listen kiddo, we've needed to have this talk for a long time."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. I'm coming over. And I'm bringing someone with me."

* * * *

I had no idea when I crossed the line from heavy drinker to blackout drinker. It baffled me, I was so convinced I had my shit together and everything was under control. Janine and I were having a rough patch so I was drinking more to calm my nerves, she kept complaining about it. I thought she was just bitchy because the new record wasn't doing very well. 'Too Much

Trouble' and 'Serenity Speeches' were still being played on the radio, but the Blue Is had lost their momentum, the record industry seemed to be changing daily along with mainstream demand, and Wolf Creek Records was struggling.

We'd been living together almost two years by then, which seems to be the point for most couples when the novelty wears off. It hadn't for me, I was still captivated by her and my heart still flip-flopped when she walked through the door. It certainly wasn't a honeymoon anymore I had to admit, but it was still good. We fought sometimes, but we were mostly at peace, in love with our life and with each other. The best thing was sharing the intimacy of our art, we wrote songs and poems and prose together, sharing what we each cared about deeply seemed to bind us. Sometimes I did not know where one of us ended and the other one began.

I was writing more and more by the time the second album had been released, and I finished an entire novel while Janine was on the road to keep myself occupied. The book was even doing a little bit of business in the underground LGBT publishing world and surprised me with its financial reward. Although modest, I was surprised to have a return on it at all, I really just wanted to publish a novel, it had been a long time dream. Janine inspired me, she had been my muse after all.

There had been fights. Nothing serious, though. I was reviewing all the information and still couldn't find the answer to why I was now sitting on my front porch wasted, having almost killed my own puppy, my lover gone and *very* angry with me. Some of our fights were about drugs and alcohol, mine *and* hers, but not too often. Could that really be the one and only problem?

* * * *

"This is Daniel," Cindy said.

Okay. I didn't know who the hell this guy was or why Cin had brought him to my house.

"Maggie, Dan's in recovery. He's been sober for sixteen years."

Now I understood.

“Oh. Is this really necessary?”

“Well, your girlfriend is at the emergency vet with your dog you nearly ran over. Every time I’ve seen you in the past three months you’ve had a drink in your hand and were either already drunk or well on your way. There’s an open case of beer and a bottle of Johnny Walker in your car you don’t remember driving to go buy. I’d say it’s necessary.”

She had a point.

For the next hour I said nothing at all as Dan told me about his own drinking, how he got sober, and all about recovery. I was humiliated but, somehow, what he was saying to me made sense. I’d declared myself an alcoholic a very long time ago, and had been back-pedaling ever since, trying to find a way to not give up something I loved more than anything in the world, even more than music, or art, or books, or even Janine. Imagining my life without alcohol was impossible.

“Don’t think of it as forever, that’s too overwhelming. Do you think you can not drink for the next 24 hours?”

“Yeah. I can do that.”

“If I come and pick you up tomorrow, will you go to a meeting with me?”

“Okay.”

“Good. That’s a good start, Maggie. I know you don’t know me from Adam, but believe me when I tell you I know exactly how you feel.”

I did believe him, although I wasn’t sure why. Cindy obviously trusted him, she brought him to my house on what was perhaps the worst night of my life, and she knew I wouldn’t like that one bit. Quitting drinking, and even going to twelve-step meetings, had occurred to me in the past. But then I’d dry out for a few days and feel better, and that plan dissolved. But now I was being “twelve-stepped” (a term I would learn over the next several days) by Dan, and, from where I sat, it didn’t seem like there was a choice in the matter anymore.

For another hour the three of us talked and drank coffee. The more Dan talked the more I liked him, and he related to me

in a way no one had before. He described how he felt when he was actively drinking and it was exactly the same way I had felt. Describing the guilt and remorse in great detail, he even cried a little, which struck me as honest, and intimate, and real. He was very well read, and super smart, which told me the way I pictured 12-step programs had been inaccurate. With each story he told, I grew more hopeful.

I heard Jack's truck pull up in the driveway and became very afraid about what was going to happen next. Cindy locked eyes with me and said, "Don't say a word. Let me do this."

I stayed in the living room with Dan while Cindy intercepted Janine at the front door. I noticed she didn't have Joplin with her. Cindy shuffled Janine off down the hall towards our bedroom.

"She drinks too, you know," I said to Dan. "And uses drugs." *Although, I don't think she has in a while,* I thought to myself.

"Don't make this about her. I came here to help you," he said sternly.

We sat there and listened to the muffled conversation behind the bedroom door. In a few minutes, they returned. Janine shook Dan's hand and thanked him for coming.

She turned to me.

"You nicked him with your tire but he got away before you ran him over. He is going to be okay but he needed to stay at the vet ER. His pelvic bone is broken but it will heal. The bleeding was from a broken tooth he got from tumbling away after the impact. I'm going to bed." And she walked back down the hall.

I started to cry, relieved I hadn't actually killed Joplin.

"What do I do now?"

Cindy hugged me and then sat next to me on the couch, rubbing my back.

"I'm not a marriage counselor," Dan said. "Your relationship is yours to deal with. Here's my card. Call me tomorrow." And with that he stood up and shook my hand, turned to Cin and said, "We should go now."

I sat and cried for a few more minutes after locking the

door behind them. I watched through the window as they removed my case of Dos Equis and brown paper bag from the passenger's seat of the Corolla. This was actually happening to me and, in a rare moment, I looked skyward and said, "Please help me."

I woke up on the couch with the TV on and heard Janine moving about in the kitchen. When I padded in to get a cup of coffee, she was standing at the sink emptying bottles.

She looked up, saw me, and said, "I thought this might help."

God she was beautiful, it was difficult to believe she was even still there. Everything we'd been through together and she was still there. I loved her so much it hurt. I crossed the floor to her and pulled her to me.

"I'm so sorry, Janine."

I cried and cried and cried while she held me, leaning up against the kitchen counter, empty bottles lined up like soldiers on the marble counter top. I dared to hope that she loved me enough to stay with me, to forgive me. Kissing her, I felt a sudden rush of sexual desire, an odd feeling to mix with my shame and remorse. I lifted her onto the kitchen island, shoving aside notebooks and newspapers and pens and mail. Tears were still running rivers down my face as I reached down into her pajama pants and thrust my fingers into her, lightly biting on her neck and feeling the pull of her hands tangled up in my hair.

I whispered in her ear while I stroked her, "Baby girl...I love you so much...don't ever leave me...I'm so sorry...I love you so much...I need you...need you..."

She came and then buried her face in my chest, crying along with me.

* * * *

For the next two months I stayed sober. Joplin was able to return home and made a full recovery and was as happy a puppy as he'd ever been. And he still loved me so he either didn't know or forgot I was responsible for his accident in the first place. Dan

had become my “sponsor” and I was adjusting to life anew. To really get a handle on things, I decided to go back to my last therapist; she had helped me five years prior when I was in the blackest depression I’d ever experienced. I felt better than I had in a long time, physically and emotionally, even spiritually. Janine was still drinking, but she didn’t drink like I did, she never had. As far as I knew, she wasn’t using any drugs either, or, if she was, she wasn’t telling me. It didn’t matter to me, she could do as she pleased, she wasn’t the one who almost killed Joplin or had blackouts, at least not that I was aware of. Her gig life was still sometimes a mystery to me, at times I thought maybe it was better I didn’t know what she was up to without me. Several people had warned me relationships that began before sobriety would not survive and I calmly explained they didn’t understand what Janine and I had and I was not worried.

We went out with Bobby and Angela to check out a new band and everyone was drinking but me. It was the first time I’d ventured into a bar since the Joplin incident, and it was uncomfortable but it was nice to know I could do something I’d done before but do it sober. The truth was, as it had been explained to me, I could do anything that “normal” people could do, except drink.

* * * *

“Let’s take a vacation.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about it for a while. It would do us good to get away, have some alone time away from our everyday lives. Lay on the beach, souvenir shop...make love in the morning to the sound of the seagulls...” I leaned over and kissed her.

Since I stopped drinking our sex life had gone through the roof again, we were making love nearly every day, it was as if we’d returned to an earlier time, like it felt new again, it was wonderful.

“We can afford it,” I coaxed. We could. I had picked up

several freelance writing gigs and the book was still selling. Although this was great news for me, I knew Janine was depressed about her own career. As she had predicted a long time ago, Sam quit the Blue Is and started his own band, The Poe Punks, a blues fusion folk-pop unique-sounding band, a cross between Portishead and Blues Traveler if you can imagine such a thing. There was a lot of experimental stuff going on in the music business in 1997, and, although Janine and Dean struggled to keep things going, it was clear the glory days of The Blue Is were coming to an end. Janine and Dean were mostly feeding themselves musically through duo gigs where he played guitar and she sang, and she had some additional solo gigs of her own. She was a decent guitar player, which was a nice security for any singer. Janine was writing more than she had in years, but it wasn't the star-studded, champagne-filled, neon-lighted life we'd all gotten accustomed to when 'Too Much Trouble' was still flying off the shelves.

"The condo?" Janine asked.

"Yes. My parents are in Ireland until May."

"So when would we go?"

"I dunno. A couple of weeks? I need to wrap up some freelance gigs and make sure everything's cool at Phantom."

My parents were snowbirds and spent the better part of the year in Cocoa Beach, Florida. When they weren't there, my sister and I were free to use the condo whenever we wanted. I'd taken Janine there only once before, early in our relationship. Prior to our getting together I went down there at least once a year and I missed it. But being partnered with a rock star had its scheduling problems.

I met with Dan the next afternoon and, much to my disappointment, he thought taking a vacation was a terrible idea. "There's a very good chance you will come back drunk."

"You're out of your mind," I said.

"Really? My experience says otherwise."

He was so smug. Sober for sixteen years was supposed to impress me? Truthfully, I was only going to meetings because it did seem to help me stay sober. When I thought about

drinking, something someone had said in those meetings came to mind, and the desire would pass. But I wasn't reading their literature, and I most certainly wasn't "working the steps," whatever that meant. These people seemed to crave some sort of religion or spirituality, and, as far as I was concerned, I already had that. My spiritual mojo was just fine, and I already had a "higher power of my own understanding." I believed wholeheartedly the Fates had played a hand in what had happened that night with Joplin, and that it was a god or goddess who saved the dog, and me along with him. Janine and I had also had multiple conversations about something greater than ourselves being responsible for us finding one another in the very large world we lived in, and that our individual artistic talents must have been divinely inspired. I was thoroughly convinced I needed to stop drinking the way I had been, but stop drinking entirely? That couldn't be necessary. I didn't need Dan, and I didn't need recovery either.

"Just don't call me drunk," he said, and promptly left me alone in the coffee shop.

Chapter 8

Driving down the B-line from Orlando airport all the way into Cocoa Beach was only about a 45 minute trip. When we drove over the last bridge that straddled the Banana River, I could see the ocean in the distance and began to cry. Every time I came here this happened, my love for the Atlantic moved me so, my desire to be near her overwhelming. True, she was near to me in New York and Jersey also, but it was different down here with the clean beaches and the palm trees and the Tiki bars. If ever there was a presence of God in my heart, it was when I sat on the golden sand, free from my responsibilities for just one week, ruler in a private paradise that belonged only to me and my girl.

I looked over at her, hair blowing in the breeze with Wayfarers on. So beautiful, my angel, my muse, my musician. She also looked at peace and I knew I'd done right by taking her here, away from worry and stress and the stardom that was slipping through her fingers. Selfishly, I was glad the success of The Blue Is was waning, she was home more, with me more, and writing what she wanted to write instead of what would sell best in the media. Wolf Creek Records and the rest of the industry would have eaten her alive if they had continued along the same path. She would never admit it, but I knew, secretly, she was relieved to be out of the spotlight, at least temporarily. Janine Jordan had a loyal following, with or without the band, and, if she did it right, she could rebuild as a solo artist. The world belonged to her, she just couldn't see it yet. I loved the fragility of her esteem, that she *needed* to be talented, it was what created her passion for life, for love, even for me.

We unpacked ourselves in the little one room efficiency. It wasn't much, but when you were five feet from the shoreline how much did you really need? A bed, a bathroom, and a small kitchenette. We'd buy lunch meat at the grocery store and do nothing but lie on the beach for the next six glorious days.

I had taken other women here, and always thought about them my first few moments inside. How many of them dared I

believed would be returning for a second visit, a third? One of them for sure. Maybe two. They all seemed so far away now, distant memories that faded each time the magnificent creature lighting a cigarette on the balcony so much as spoke my name.

I looked at her standing there, the warm April breeze lifting her hair. For just a moment I had a vision of her as an older woman, gracefully gray and still fit, as sexy and appealing at 70 as she was right now. Maybe the worst was behind us. My heavy drinking, her heroin use, the uncertainty of our everyday life. Still, somewhere deep within I heard a quiet and still voice, and that voice assured me the sunny bright future was only a fantasy. *Shut the fuck up*, I demanded of my inner pessimist.

"What?" Janine said from the balcony.

"I love you."

"Oh. Well, I love you too, baby."

She smiled and the fog of my melancholy lifted.

"Let's go out."

We got dressed in capris and tank tops and were both white as ghosts. It would take a day or two to fit in with the locals. Not much sunning available to us in Astoria, at least not yet. We could lay out in the back yard but it was still not warm enough up north.

April, on the other hand, was perfect in central Florida. I'd been down there in every season, and spring was still the best.

"There's a great jazz club in Melbourne and the food is awesome."

"You didn't tell me that the last time we were here."

"Maggie. Baby. I barely knew you the last time we were here. The last time we stood on this balcony I wasn't convinced I wouldn't be hitching a ride back to the airport the first night. I was so afraid to fall for you."

I'd had no idea she was that afraid, it never showed.

"And now?" I teased.

"Maggie O'Leary, if you do not know by now you are the greatest love of my life, then you never will."

She'd never said such a thing and, quite frankly, I was shocked. I thought she could never feel the same after the

incident with Joplin. And I never really believed she loved me as much as I did her. But here she was, telling me so. Maybe that voice had been wrong. Just maybe.

* * * *

Forty-five minutes later we were being shown to an outdoor table by our handsome host. Too good looking to *not* be gay. Melbourne had a somewhat visible gay community so it was a nice choice for our first night there. I could relax and be publicly affectionate without raising too many eyebrows. How I missed her, how I missed us. Did we really need to take a vacation to find that, that, *thing*, whatever it was? Magic some would call it. I guess this was what a mature relationship looked like, sometimes you felt it, and sometimes you didn't. In that instant, being handed a menu, understanding of what I'd been missing all those years finally broke through all the years of pain, of searching, of abandonment issues that would make psychiatrists shrivel in their seats. I wanted to marry her.

Jesus, I thought. *Did I really just think that?* Most certainly, I had.

"Can I get you a drink?" our waitress said.

"I'll have a rum runner on the rocks."

"Diet coke for me please. With a lemon."

When the waitress trotted away, Janine reached across the table and took my hand.

"We're on vacation, darling."

"And?" I knew what she was going to say. She wanted me to drink. And, oh, how I wanted to drink. But I needed it to be her idea.

"Maggie, I'm so proud of you for doing what you've done, for going to meetings, for hanging out with Dan, and going back to your old therapist. Really, you have done an about-face, and I'm happy. I'm happy that you seem happier. But isn't it at least possible you just had a rough patch? I know it's selfish, but I don't know if I can get used to the idea of you *never* drinking. We used to have a good time, remember?"

The waitress returned with our drinks.

"Bring another one of those, will you sweetheart?" Why shouldn't I? Everything was better now. I would never, ever, let it get that bad again. I loved my life, and Janine more than ever. Dan was a good guy, but he didn't know me. And the recovery community had been a fine bunch of people to hang out with, I even had fun. But it was over now. This was my life, complete with social drinking. I mean, really, what was I going to do, plan a dry wedding? The very idea seemed ridiculous. So I drank, with an overwhelming sense of relief.

* * * *

We shared a wonderful meal complete with a magnificent sunset. The rum runners were tasty, and went straight to my head after not having a drop for two whole months, it felt good, really good. I had two and stopped, no problem. Maybe those "program" people had been wrong about me. Or, perhaps I'd even still go, and "work the steps" and on myself, that's what I did in therapy anyway.

"Babe?" Janine shook me from my ruminating.

"Sorry." I took her hands across the table. "I was somewhere else for a minute."

"Where to?"

"Dunno. There's a lesbian bar in Satellite Beach."

"Sounds good."

We paid the check and drove the 45 minutes back to Cocoa Beach; the bar in Satellite was only ten minutes in the other direction just over the causeway. After I pulled into a parking spot and cut the engine, I leaned over and kissed Janine. She grinned at me and said, "We really do have an awesome life, don't we?"

"We do," I managed to say before I burst into tears of gratitude. I could not remember the last time I'd felt so happy. The storm had passed, and everything was going to be alright, I could feel it. Maybe Janine was right, we'd had a bad year or so, but it was over now, and neither of us knew what the future held.

"We should move here," I said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Why not?"

"It would be nice. You could open that little bookstore you've always wanted to. I could become a beloved local musician."

I could tell by her tone she wasn't serious.

"I mean it, Janine."

"I know you do. Look, Maggie, I'm not ready. I'm not finished with New York just yet. Dean and I might start a new band. Or I might go produce...I was going to tell you tonight that Sam called me."

The Poe Punks had done very well for themselves so far. Simultaneously, Sam had been getting into the production end of things with the label that signed him, he was very ambitious, and knew that's where the real money was at.

She was right. Florida, or anywhere else, was a dream a long time away. But it was nice to imagine. Me and the glimpse of that older Janine I'd seen earlier in the condo. Our life together. I couldn't imagine it any other way. So my dream would wait.

Still, when we got back to New York, I was going shopping for a ring. We couldn't legally get married, but there was hope in the gay community that we would see that day in our lifetime. Until then, there were plenty of progressive churches that would perform the ceremony, even if there wasn't a bona fide document to back it up. It was more about the ritual, the display of our commitment to one another, in front of our friends and families, God. I'd always wanted that, but had only ever considered going through with the whole thing one other time in my life. I never imagined I'd love anyone like that ever again, but here we were.

No sooner did we enter Sappho's than we were pounced upon by a leggy blond in daisy dukes with a beer in each hand. She had an eighties throwback hairstyle and smelled like tanning oil and cigarettes. I was sure she thought Janine was someone else.

"I can't fucking believe it!" she shrieked. She grabbed my

girlfriend and kissed her on the mouth.

“Uh...yeah...Jess, this is my partner, Maggie.”

Jess stepped back for a moment, seemingly shocked.

“Oh. Well, then! Sorry about that, we go way back, I haven’t seen Janine since Tampa! What was that, seven, eight years ago, honey?”

I took an immediate dislike to Jess. Not because she was an ex of Janine’s, but because she was loud and obnoxious. She trotted back towards the bar yelling to her other friends, “Do you *know* who the fuck this is?”

“Sorry.” Janine looked at me sheepishly.

“It’s fine. Just hard to imagine you with her.”

“It is for me too, believe me. It wasn’t serious. I used to play at this dive bar and she was always there, then suddenly I had a big dyke following. They bought my singles and gave me confidence.”

“So you slept with a groupie?”

“We don’t have to stay here.”

“Don’t be silly! Its fine, I’m kind of amused actually.”

She patted me on the ass and pushed me in the direction of the bar. “Jerk,” she teased.

Sappho’s was busy for a Thursday night. We hung out at the bar and chit chatted with the other women, occasionally interrupted by the sheer decibel level of Jess. The bar had a stage but there was no one on it, just a single mike and an acoustic guitar propped up against it, and I kept seeing Janine eying it sideways. Such a performer. While she was in the bathroom, I approached Jess.

“Hey, no hard feelings, huh? Me and her were a long time ago.”

“Yeah, it’s fine. Listen, are you a regular here?”

“Honey, I’m a regular everywhere.”

“Right. Do you think you could get the bartender to turn on the sound system and let her play?”

“Why fuck yeah! That’s a great idea! Charlene! Char, get off that damn cellphone and get over here!”

When Janine came back from the bathroom Charlene said,

"I hear you're a singer?" and handed Janine the cordless mike. She looked at me. "Let me guess. This was your idea?" "You know it."

No further convincing was needed. Someone else in the bar also played guitar and went to their car to get their instrument. Within an hour I felt like I had that night with Cin at CBGBs, so proud, so grateful, so glad she was mine.

Different girls in the bar went up and sang with her, kind of like live karaoke and Janine was the machine with all the lyrics. The other guitar girl was good and knew quite a few tunes, they covered Fleetwood Mac, Bonnie Raitt, Fiona Apple. The crowd grew and by 1 AM the whole bar joined in for a rendition of Joan Jett's "I Love Rock n' Roll."

From the corner of my eye I saw Janine exit through the side door with Jess. It didn't concern me too much until after about twenty minutes they didn't return.

"Excuse me for a minute," I said to the brunette who was asking me about my book. The one woman in the bar who didn't know who Janine was, but knew who I was instead.

I stepped outside the door they'd gone through and no one was there. Just the looming dumpsters of the bar and a darkened alley. I walked the length of the alley looking for other doors or spaces they could have been and found none. Panic slowly started to creep in. I went back around to the front where the parking lot was and, sure enough, our rental car was gone, and Janine and Jess along with it.

"Want me to give you a ride?" the brunette asked when I grabbed the phone book off the end of the bar.

I thought for a minute. She was hot. Really hot. And I was entitled since Janine had just run off to God knows where, abandoning me here in this shitty dyke bar crammed to the hilt with white trash, peroxide bleached, hide tanned locals. The woman I was talking to whose name I hadn't caught was on vacation too, some social worker from Pennsylvania. And she wasn't high, *and* she'd read my book. How much sex is driven by our ego? But in my heart I knew I couldn't do it. Hadn't I just decided earlier I wanted to marry the woman, after all?

"Thanks. I'll take a cab."

* * * *

The phone in the condo rang at around 5:30 AM. I did not intend to rescue her, so I let the machine pick up the call and rolled over to go back to sleep. And then I heard a man's voice say, "This is officer Roberts at the Brevard County Sheriff's department..."

"Hello?"

"Is this Margaret O'Leary?"

"Yes?"

"Do you have a Ford Taurus rental car registered to you, ma'am?"

"Yes?"

"And you're traveling on vacation here with a Jeanie...I'm sorry...Janine..."

"Janine Jordan, yes? What's happened?"

"Ma'am, I'm going to need you to come down here. There's been an accident."

Frantic, I dressed and went downstairs. Fuck! How was I going to get there? She had taken the car. I ran back upstairs, past my own door and down the hall to my aunt and uncle's place. Thank God old people rise early. The door was open and they were out on their balcony drinking coffee.

"Hi there! We wondered if we'd see you today! We were pretty sure you got in last night."

"Hi. Um, I can't explain right now, but I need to borrow your car. Janine's been in an accident."

"Oh, my, is she okay?" asked my aunt Mary.

"I don't know, I need to go. Now."

My uncle Bob handed me his keys and I was out the door. They were very sweet, my aunt and uncle. I liked spending time with them when I got down to the condo, but had no time right at that moment.

My mind raced all the way to the police station. What if she was dead? They wouldn't tell me on the phone. What if

she'd killed someone else? They wouldn't have told me that on the phone either. *Calm down Mags, just calm down*, I told myself.

I parked crookedly in the first spot I found and ran inside.

After giving my name I was told to wait for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, a uniformed officer came in, retrieved me, and walked me down a long hallway to an office. "Here she is," he said, and ushered me in.

"Have a seat Miss O'Leary. I'm Lieutenant Whitesell."

I braced myself.

"Miss Jordan is in a holding cell downstairs."

I was confused.

"They said there was an accident. Is she okay?"

"She's fine. The accident didn't involve another vehicle. Just your rental car. Miss Jordan was driving. There was another woman in the car, a Jess Morrow, do you know her?"

"I don't understand."

"Miss O'Leary, do you use illegal narcotics?"

"What? No. What's this about?"

"Miss O'Leary, Miss Jordan was driving your rental car around, and then decided to drive the car into the Atlantic Ocean, endangering both her own life and the life of Miss Morrow. They both tested positive for opiates. And you're telling me you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Jesus Christ.

"I guess you don't, since you look genuinely surprised. Look, Miss O'Leary, we get all kinds of tourists down here. If we prosecuted every DUI, we'd never get anything else done. You will have to deal with the rental car agency and the damages to the car on your own, and by law we do have to file a report with them. I'm willing to release Miss Jordan on her own recognizance if you can pay the fines, fill out the necessary paperwork, and stay out of trouble for the duration of your stay."

"You're very kind, Mr. Whitesell."

"I know who she is, Miss O'Leary. My daughter's a big fan. Tell her she was lucky. This time."

"I will. Thank you sir."

"The car is here in the impound lot. There's a set of paperwork for that too. I believe it's drivable, it's just...wet." He struggled to contain a chuckle. I was thoroughly humiliated.

* * * *

"I need a cocktail," she said, as we slid into the soaked interior of the car.

"I thought you were dead," I said. "When they called they told me there was an accident."

"Fucking dramatic. We just got a little too close to the water."

"You're un-fucking-believable. So did you fuck her?"

"Don't be stupid."

"What then? Why the fuck did you leave with her?"

"Guess."

"Heroin."

"Yup."

"You need help."

"I know. I guess it's my turn."

I couldn't argue with that. She trashed a rental car, I nearly killed the family pet. Was that an equal playing field?

I spent the remainder of the day cleaning up Janine's mess. Dealing with the car at a detail shop, making up lies to my aunt and uncle, dealing with the rental car agency, all while Janine slept off her chemical hangover in the condo. When all was said and done, my new credit card balance was through the roof and the Brevard County sheriff had taken a nice chunk out of my savings. I was exhausted and at 4:30 PM it started to rain. Perfect. I crawled into bed next to her.

She rolled over and kissed me. I resented her power over me, no matter what she did, my love for her would not go away, would not diminish in the slightest. But I really needed her to stop fucking up like this.

"Do you want to stop?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to go to treatment?"

"No."

"So what do we do?"

"I don't know. Maybe you should call your friend Dan."

"Um, I think the fact I'm drinking would make him not want to talk to me."

"Maybe I should go to meetings. They have different ones for drug addicts, don't they?"

"I guess so, yeah."

"I'm sorry Maggie."

"I know baby. I know."

We made love that afternoon like we were never going to see each other again. And maybe we weren't, at least that version of ourselves. I didn't know how Janine and I would move forward after that day, so all I could do was be hyper focused in each moment, each breath of our sexual energy. The electricity of her touch, the magic of her skin, the feel of her hands in my hair. Never had I so completely given myself to someone as I had to her. There was an actual, tangible, physical feeling that the hand of God pushed us towards each other that night at Avenue A Records, I still remembered it. A singer, a writer, there was so much passion in our togetherness I was surprised things didn't burn up in our presence. Neither one of us knew how to stop anymore, neither one of us knew how to *not* love the other. That afternoon in bed, I remembered it all: that first Dewar's she ordered at the bar, watching Nosferatu, the musicians in the park, making love on the beach, the letters, the phone calls, hearing her sing in the shower. Those snapshot moments I called upon were all there too: that day with our parents in the backyard, the first time I walked through the front door of our Astoria home, the look on her face when I brought Joplin home as a little puppy. All my memories came flooding back as I reviewed our history, Janine's own lyrics the soundtrack to my reverie. Love was too small of a word.

Chapter 9

I was sitting at the kitchen island on a stool, reading the lyrics of the song she sang the night before for the first time, for me, a gift. In our entire history she'd never managed to keep a new song a secret, she'd get too excited about it, or too nervous about performing it for the first time, but this one she had. Its relevance haunted me for the remainder of the night and into the morning.

"So keep your eye on the stage show...maybe you'll find me there... like I do..." She had been talking about losing herself lately, immersed in a depression about where she was going with her life, I would have said it was a mid-life crisis but she was only shy of thirty-three.

And then there was the part that was especially for me,

"And she's got me...and I'm drunk again...oh, she'll regret me in the morning...I know baby...I had it coming..."

Because of course her melancholy had to be complete with her delusions that I would leave her now she wasn't famous or making a lot of money. The very notion was ridiculous, and I didn't know how in her own mind she could get so far away from how much I loved her.

But we weren't happy, and I was out of ideas for how to get happy. Just a few days ago we decided to seek couples counseling. The clean and sober gig wasn't really working, sometimes we were, sometimes we weren't. After "the Florida incident" as we came to refer to it, we became diligent "twelve-steppers" for about six months, then we just sort of tapered off. Now, we both went to meetings sometimes and sometimes not, would put together a few weeks drug and alcohol free, then fall off, then go back. I'd been told what we were doing was "bouncing in and out of the rooms." That didn't bother me. The truth was I got something out of going, Janine did too, we both had beliefs in spiritual practices and strove to be decent and kind people. But neither one of us really wanted to be clean and sober. Sobriety became like drinking and using itself, sometimes we did it and sometimes we didn't. There were some rules we

agreed to and had managed to adhere to for almost a year already. No drinking and driving, ever. If we were together and one of us thought the other one was going too far, with alcohol or anything else, we were allowed to say that and not fight about it. Neither of us could be fucked up when Janine was performing, whether I was there or not since she needed to come home to a partner who was present. Cocaine was reserved for when it was free at a club or someone else's house. Weed was okay on occasion when we were both in the mood, which was rare. Hard street drugs like crank and other methamphetamines were out. And heroin was an absolute no-no.

Our lifestyle had been a little short-circuited financially as well, but we still made out okay each month with our combined income. I hadn't written anything in several months, aside from a weekly column I managed to grab through a friend of a friend of Cindy's at the Village Voice. Phantom was downsizing but still holding its own in the industry. My publisher was bugging me for a book of short stories I had promised nearly nine months ago, but it just wasn't coming. Janine was writing and playing, trying to find a new direction and not be just another chick with a guitar.

To bring in money, though, she had gone to work for Sam, and so had Dean. They team managed Sam's recording studio, which had graduated from the room in Brooklyn Heights to a full blown facility in the lower east side of Manhattan. The Poe Punks had just completed a global tour, and it seemed nearly everything Sam touched turned to gold. I knew Janine was envious of his success, but I kept reminding her that at least he was one of the good guys.

So I needed to write and I took a week off to do so. So far all I had accomplished was watching the entire *Godfather* trilogy on VHS and being able to attend Janine's gigs for the past two nights. It was already Wednesday and I hadn't written a word.

Right. So, inspiration, inspiration, that's what I needed. I opened a bottle of wine and poured half a glass, picked it up and wandered over to our bookshelves. How I loved our shelves, so many years of history in the making, first as individuals and now as a couple. When we first moved in together we went through

everything and pulled out all the duplicates, books we both owned. By the time we were finished we had enough for a small garage sale. The same thing happened with our CD collection. They were all housed in our living room, quite the display of who and what we were, it was my favorite part of the whole house.

I browsed the writers I envied, the ones I thought were better than me: Augusten Burroughs, David Foster Wallace, TC Boyle, Joyce Carol Oates, gently running my hand along the well-worn spines. I got to the autobiography I had of Carson McCullers and noticed it was sticking out past the shelf. So was the Aldous Huxley next to it. I pulled them out to reveal a small wooden box.

I didn't need to open it to know what was inside. *God dammit, Janine*, I thought. This was a "works" box. Inside there would be a tie band, a needle, a spoon. There was no way for me to know how long it had been there and I really, really wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, maybe she'd hidden it there eons ago and forgotten all about it. But inside I knew; Janine wouldn't forget where that box was anymore than I would misplace a bottle of single malt scotch.

* * * *

I did write that afternoon, I had nothing else to do with my feelings, nowhere to put them. So I set to work crafting two rough drafts for stories I would need for a total collection of twelve. One was a refurbishing of something I'd written a long time ago and never did anything with, the other was inspired by a little boy I had seen on the street the other day, holding hands with what I naturally assumed were his two dads. At least it was a start, and it kept me and my mind occupied while I waited for Janine to come home, walking blissfully unaware into her own crucifixion.

I was back in the kitchen again making a sandwich when she arrived. She walked up behind me and sang high and sweet into my ear,

"Sleep, little darlin'...things always come around...it's day by day... that keeps me from...my safe and sound..."

She had to choose that one. I loved that song. I closed my eyes and felt the enormity of her presence. Just being alone in a room with her still felt like a transcendental experience in and of itself. People talk of their loved ones and say things like, "When he/she touches me, it's like the earth moves." I think with Janine *everyone* felt it, whether you were in love with her or not was irrelevant. Of course, I still was, very much so.

She kept singing to me and came up behind me, put her arms around my waist, her chin on my shoulder, and clasped her hands around my belt buckle. She still had an overwhelming affect on me, I felt myself get wet and my knees went weak. For just a moment, I forgot about my anger, about the box, about the drain of this relationship I'd begun to feel after a year or two, I couldn't quite remember when it started feeling that way. I turned around into her embrace and looked into her eyes, hoping my anger was still visible in my own.

"Sit down baby. I want to show you something."

I left her in the kitchen and went to retrieve the box from the living room. When I returned she was smoking my cigarette and drinking my glass of wine. So easily she would do this, I found it to be one of the most sweetly endearing things about her.

When I got up to pee in the middle of the night, I'd return to find her on my side of the bed. In any social setting, if I left the room she'd take my seat. If I attempted to bring her her own drink, light a cigarette for her, anything at all, I'd somehow wind up with the new one and she'd finish the old. I asked her about it once and she'd said she felt like she always wanted to be nearer to me than she was so it just became a habit. I was so enraptured with her and everything about her, how much closer could she get?

When I put the box on the counter she opened it, examined the contents, and avoided my glare. A long silence passed between us and resentment bubbled up within me because all I could think about was how much I wanted her. Still.

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to say...oh, fuck, I don't know what I want you to say. Did you use it? I mean, have you done it? When was the

last time? Today? Yesterday? Say, baby I'm sorry, it'll never happen again? Oh, no, wait, wait, I've already heard that fucking lie! Wanna try a new one?"

"I'm trying," she said.

"Try harder."

I'm trying? That's what I was expected to accept? She wasn't my troubled teenager failing a class, and I wasn't her fucking mother. I'm trying. I could not believe that was all she had to say.

She looked scared though. She was afraid I would walk. This both pleased and troubled me. I was glad she at least showed some concern about losing me, who wouldn't be? It fed my ego. I thought about how hard it was to be with her, to be with anyone. But deep in my soul, in those darkest corners I had tried to drown with the blood in my own veins, she lived, tethered to me, a part of me. This is what troubled me so and often ripped me from peaceful sleep in the middle of the night. I was terrified of my desire to spend the rest of my life with Janine. At the end of each day it all came down to this one thing. Regardless of drugs, drink, her status as a famous or not famous singer, her annoying attachment to define herself as bisexual; my last vision of each night overcame all of that. I ritually looked at her face each night before I drifted off to sleep, and when I did, it was impossible to imagine my life without her in it.

If Janine were to vanish into thin air at that very moment, I would remember every single attribute of her face, every curve of her body, every tone of her beautiful voice, and every single word she had ever so much as whispered to me. There are no words to describe the terror that accompanies that kind of love.

Still, if I was going to be effective at all I had to act.

"Janine, I'm not sure if I can do this anymore. I'm going to stay somewhere for a few days and get it together. I suggest you do the same."

Like any lover reluctant to leave, I hesitated by the door, hoping she would protest. But before she could say anything, there was a knock at the door.

Kerry Washington didn't wait for an answer. He opened the door and walked into my house as if he belonged there. He didn't. I knew who this prick was, a dealer who scored for nearly everyone we knew, and I suspected had been Janine's supplier both for the times I'd caught her and for the times I hadn't.

Without warning, a rage gripped me that I probably hadn't felt since the last woman I'd caught red-handed in another woman's bed. Not really knowing what I was doing, I snatched the needle off the counter from Janine's box and charged at him. With the element of surprise on my side, I threw him up against the living room wall. With one arm I held him under his chin, and with the other I gripped the needle in a fist ready to plunge it into his throat. Never in my life had I done such a thing, like a fucking action hero in a movie, and my subconscious was frantically watching wondering if this was really me.

The punk, and he was just a punk, was terrified. He thought I was out of my mind and just crazy enough to stab him in the jugular. I stood poised and spoke clearly and slowly, "If I ever, ever catch you here or anywhere near her, I will fucking kill you."

I let go.

"Fucking bitch! You think you're some goddamn super dyke or something? Why, 'cause you're getting a piece of that?" He jerked his head in Janine's direction.

"Let me tell you something, baby, everybody's had a piece of that! And as far as who's taking who out, I'm the one who could get away with it, you don't know who you're fucking with!"

And that was it, he turned and left. The whole incident couldn't have lasted more than five minutes. I wasn't afraid of Kerry Washington, he was exactly what I said he was, a punk. He knew a few people who introduced him to a few other people and band members of all different ranks called him by name only because he had something they wanted.

I couldn't recall the last, if any, Arnold Schwarzenegger film I'd seen, so my action hero self wasn't quite sure what to do next. Stupidly I stood there with the front door hanging open and

watched Kerry peel out of our driveway in a Trans-Am. Not only were we in an Arnold movie, but one that apparently took place in a heavily Italian populated area of the Jersey shore. Clearly my love for Janine had, in fact, driven me out of my mind. Why else would someone like me, a thirty-six year old lesbian author, with a nice house and cool job in Manhattan, think it was an everyday occurrence to go around threatening the lives of drug dealers? Insanity was the only plausible explanation.

“Maggie, look...”

There was Janine, bringing me back into the blinding light of reality. The sound of her saying my name weighed on me like lead. Then she was near me, the soft hand of obsession and passion gently on my back. Words were always followed by touch, it was how she operated. In all this time, I couldn't recall even one conversation with her at one end of a room, or even a couch, and me at the other.

“I don't blame you for being angry with me. I'm angry with myself. The last time was about a week ago, I won't lie to you. Frank was here (a colleague from Sam's recording studio) and he was really depressed. He asked if I'd get high with him and I did. It's hard to say no, Maggie. You don't understand because you've never done it.”

Apparently this was a great flaw of mine. Because I'd never indulged in a drug that scared the hell out of me, I was unable to commiserate with her as I could with other drugs. I knew how hard it was to become a functional person who was still a heavy drinker but wouldn't cross the line anymore into the behavior of a raging, maniacal alcoholic. And I knew how it felt and what it meant to continue with a woman I inherently understood would destroy me, but that didn't seem to count either.

“That was the first time since Florida. I swear. Please look at me.”

I was still standing at the front door. I'd closed it, but stood staring at it, wondering what miracle of strength would allow me to walk through it and never return.

“Baby, Maggie, please...”

She slipped between me and the door. There were tears

on her face, little wet spots on her shirt. I noticed because it was a light gray color, then I thought it was strange to notice such a thing at such a time. Never would I *need* heroin, or any drug, even liquor, because life with Janine was mesmerizing and intoxicating enough.

It was so strange, even after four years together, to be face to face with her like this. To know I was the only person in the world to touch her the way I did. Gently she buried her face in my shoulder and wept. I brushed her hair back from her shoulders and took her face in my hands. She told me she loved me and I believed her.

Sometimes I hadn't been so convinced, but in that moment I was, which seemed strange since she had just betrayed me. But something in her I had been waiting for to change finally had. It was almost a noticeable change in the air, or weather, some little piece of her that had been un-surrendered to me gave way.

"I love you. So much," she repeated.

She kissed me as she often did after a fight, testing to see what I would do, if I were still angry, if I'd resist her or hold something back. I didn't. We made love in front of the living room door, an irony that had not escaped me. It was a door to the outside world, which after all meant so little to me in comparison to this woman, this hold on my being who had stepped off a merry-go-round and into my life. As we laid there not speaking, not having any desire to get dressed, or even get off the floor, I had a crushing feeling of something inside me, screaming, that turned to a soft whimper, defeated again. Janine lay with her head on my shoulder, an arm strewn carelessly across my waist. I stared at the faint scar of a pinprick and the moment lasted a long time, an eternity, and I finally knew and understood. I would never leave her, and she would never stop using.

Chapter 10

Jesus, she's not even trying to hide it anymore.

I had awakened in an empty bed. When I went to go find Janine the house was empty and there was a small, mostly empty bag of dope and all its accoutrements on the coffee table in plain view. The night before we had argued, and it seemed to me we argued every day now, and had been for two months, maybe three, maybe six, I couldn't even say. We argued about money, about drugs and alcohol, about appliances and grocery shopping and sex and the pets. The list of things we did *not* argue about was much shorter.

I told Cindy as much when I arrived at the coffee shop to find her already there with a double shot espresso waiting patiently for me. Gracious Cindy, the epitome of a best friend. She had never abandoned me, or judged me for anything I had ever done. I knew her patience had grown thin with the Janine and Maggie story though.

I sat down saying, "I don't know what I can ask or what you can tell me that haven't already been said."

"Actually, I do have something new, something I haven't had the courage to say to you before."

It was difficult for me to imagine Cindy not having the courage to do anything, let alone say something to me.

"Okay. Go ahead."

"Maggie, I love you, you are my dearest friend and have been for many years. But in the past three months, you have turned into someone I barely know. And whenever we get together, all I ever hear about is negative talk about Janine, what she does and doesn't do, what she will and won't do, I'm astonished at how self-centered you have become."

I said nothing.

"I've watched you be sober and not sober, alive and enjoying life and in the blackest depressions. You have thrived and you have struggled, but you have always known who you are and where you stand, at least, until now. I know you better than anyone, even Janine."

Agreed.

“Maggie, how on earth can you expect her to give up her favorite drug when you refuse to give up yours?”

In that instant, I had a moment of clarity unlike any other. It was so simple, but I had run from the truth for so long it was unrecognizable to me until it was laid on the table in plain sight. Oh, how I wished I could take back the last year, even the last month. To have done things differently, to stop blaming others and take some responsibility.

Since I had managed to become a “controlled drinker” I thought my problem was solved. But it wasn’t, not even close. The truth was I spent most of my time planning and thinking about and anticipating the next drink, all day, all night, all the time. I denied those 12 step people because they insisted I admit my powerlessness, and I could not. Until now.

And then there was Janine. My beautiful, sweet, tortured Janine, who I had claimed to love more than anyone, or anything. But that wasn’t entirely true if I would never choose her over liquor, was it?

I had been staring into the bottom of a glass for so long, trying to drown out my fear of losing her to heroin, when in reality every drink I took pushed her closer into its comforting arms, just as every fix she had pushed me back in the bottle. At one time we only wanted to run towards each other, but somewhere along the line our addictions and habits had won out over love.

I wasn’t sure when they had become more important to us than each other but clearly they had. Alcohol and heroin had been building a wall between us, and as the walls of our own lives crumbled, that structure had become bigger and more solid, like invisible demons had been picking up the debris on the outside and carrying it into the middle of what we were, or, at least, what we could have been. With absolute certainty, the kind you feel way down even into your bones, I knew what I had to do. And I also knew it might very well be the end of us, that if I changed, there was no guarantee Janine would too.

“Maggie?”

Through a veil of tears I saw Cindy, a living testament to

the kind of woman I had always wanted to be.

"Take me to a meeting."

* * * *

"Janine, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah. I am. Believe me, I am."

Dean and Sheila had been sitting with her for nearly two hours. When she arrived at the house, she was just coming down from her last fix, so the first hour had been dedicated to alternately vomiting and having Sheila mop her brow with a wet cloth. But the shakes had now passed, and the shame and guilt had returned. Janine sat there and thought, how did it come to this? Maggie, my darling Maggie. We were so in love once, so happy. I'm so, so sorry.

"Dean, do you think if I get clean she will stop drinking?"

"I don't know, honey. I really don't. But that can't be what makes your decision for you."

"I know. I have said for years now I can't imagine my life without her, but the truth is she hasn't been in it for a long time now, not really. Not fully present. Neither of us has. I love her so much."

"We know you do," Sheila said. "But this isn't about the two of you anymore; it's about you and your life, your choices. With or without Maggie."

Janine recalled all her snapshot memories. Seeing Maggie for the first time at Avenue A Records. How it killed her to leave Maggie when the tour brought her far away from home. How it felt the first time Maggie had said, "I love you" and how terrified she looked to even think it, let alone say it.

But then she thought about her accidental overdose last week Maggie didn't even know about. She thought about the increasingly seedy places she'd been visiting these past few weeks in search of more connections and cheaper supply. She thought about the men, and the things she had become willing to do with those men in order to get her next fix.

"My God. What have I done?" she said out loud.

* * * *

In my brief visits into recovery, I had sometimes heard others talk about the experience of sitting in their 3rd, or 25th, or 100th meeting, and suddenly everything that was said made perfect sense. That day, I had that very experience. Listening to words my brain normally formulated response to like, "Bullshit," or "Yeah, maybe for you" was suddenly a vastly different experience. I didn't know *what* was different exactly, it was the same meeting I had been to before, with largely the same people I had seen before, espousing all the same wisdom they had said before. But now it had changed.

Miraculously, I could see myself in their eyes, hear my life in the stories they told, a warm feeling of kinship washed over me. I hadn't felt anything like it since my very first gay pride parade when I was eighteen. Then the realization came of what the feeling was, it had been so long since I had felt it that it seemed foreign. But at the end of the meeting, holding hands with strangers on either side of me, I knew what it was. Hope.

* * * *

"Yes. Yes, J-O-R-D-A-N, that's right. 7 AM tomorrow? Okay then, I'll be there."

Janine hung up the phone and fought the urge to call the receptionist back at the treatment center and say, "Never mind."

"We're very proud of you," Sheila said, and hugged Janine.

"Should I call Sam?"

"I'll talk to Sam. Don't you worry about that. And I'll make sure he makes the right calls to our insurance company."

"Dean, you have always been like a father to me. Do you know how much I appreciate that?"

"Well, kiddo, you've been like a daughter to me too. An ungrateful, out-of-control teenage daughter, but a daughter nonetheless."

The three of them laughed and then everyone got quiet, the heaviness of reality hung in the room.

*"What will I say to her?" Janine said, her voice cracking.
"Go home to her," Sheila replied. "Open your heart, and
the right words will come."*

* * * *

When I got home Janine still wasn't there. But it didn't matter. I had made up my mind, and if it's one thing I could say about myself, it was that I had an unbreakable stubborn streak. Maybe if I could set a good example, she would follow me into a sober life. And maybe she wouldn't, I had become willing to risk that for my own well-being.

I had believed she was my soul mate from the very beginning, and I sincerely believed if we did not survive this, there would never be another. There never *could* be another. Not after Janine. And I was sort of okay with that.

I had not told Janine my doctor's visit last week was both awful and prophetic. My doctor that I'd had for all the years I'd been with Phantom looked me in the eye and told me in no uncertain terms if I continued to drink my liver would fail me, and sooner than later.

Yet even then sobriety hadn't really looked like an option. I'd had no idea what happened to me today between this morning and now, but whatever it was there was no going back and no changing my mind. I started opening cabinets and emptying bottles into the sink, the same way Janine had done when I tried to get sober the first time. But this feeling was entirely different; there was no direct consequence or action that caused overwhelming guilt. This was just me, taking action that went against the grain of my very core.

When the last bottle was empty I went from absolute confidence to deathly afraid in an instant. Something deep within me crawled out from a very, very dark place and took over my mind and body, I don't know how else to describe it. I think recovery people call it "the disease." Whatever it was, it began to speak to me, and with each word it uttered, I became more afraid.

It told me my life would be empty without any mood

altering substances. It asked me if I really wanted to give up those feelings of invincibility, of euphoria, of calm and peace I could still sometimes achieve with a few drinks. It told me there was absolutely no way Janine would stay, and that I would never recover from that.

"Shut up!" I yelled to an empty room. Never before had I recognized this voice, but clearly it had been there all along, getting louder and louder as I moved towards betraying it.

I had an idea. An idea that would calm the beast and still let me get sober. I was afraid if I drank alcohol I would die on the spot, that my liver would give out right then and there. Besides, I had just poured every last libation down the drain. But what was left in the house was the residue inside the bag on the coffee table. Surely other people had done this, gotten one last good feeling before they entered the stark realm of both physical and emotional withdrawal?

I convinced myself what I was about to do was perfectly fine. I would make tomorrow my "sobriety date" and carry out my mission as planned. Right after this. Besides, I had always been curious. I had always wondered what was so captivating to keep Janine and others like her going back again and again and again. So I took a razor blade and scraped out the inside of the bag. There was enough for just a small bump, which was fine with me. I just wanted to try it, just this once, then clean and sober forever. I had never used a needle in my life and had no idea how to inject drugs. So I pushed the spoon and the needle aside and snorted it.

* * * *

"We're really glad you came back."

"Me too." Janine said. She got a light from the girl who had spoken to her, glad she had decided to come to a meeting before going home to Maggie. She had even talked about it in the meeting, something she had never done before the handful of times she'd been there before. Usually she only went to a meeting when Maggie had, because Maggie had. But today was

different. Today she came because she was leaving for treatment in the morning, and for the first time ever, she wanted what these people had. She wanted to quit using, and was willing to do anything to get that.

"If she really loves you, she'll support you," the girl said. "I know."

Janine got in the car and felt not afraid but excited. Maggie couldn't possibly be any happier drinking than she had been using. It would be okay. Hadn't she herself always believed that love conquers all?

* * * *

I knew I had made a horrible mistake. I felt paralyzed and blood ran down out of my nose and onto my upper lip.

Oh, fuck, was all I could think.

Then, call 911, you're okay, you're okay.

As I reached for the phone, I knew it was most certainly not okay. I clutched my chest and fell onto the floor reaching for the phone.

* * * *

Janine stood for a moment in the driveway, gathering her resolve. It had to be this way, no matter what happened, no matter how Maggie reacted. Then she did something she hadn't done in a very long time, she looked skyward and prayed.

"My God, or Goddess, whoever you are up there, I know you can hear me. I love her more than I have ever loved anyone. I know I have to get clean, and I have to do it now. I pray you will help me do that, but also that you can keep us together. We are so much better together."

* * * *

There really is a white light, you know. I saw it, and I heard a voice say, "sudden cardiac arrest." As I took my last breath, I thought I heard a key turning in the door. All I could

think was how much I loved her, and how sorry I was. And then, everything went black.

THE END

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A native Jersey girl, Angela Kelly currently resides begrudgingly in the cornfields of the Midwest with her partner, Cindy, and their furry four-legged children. She hopes to someday retire near the oceans of the east coast of Florida, where she plans to write her memoirs with a sharp shell in the sand.



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